

## THE DARK GODDESS

And Oh Thou Terrible One, show me evermore the  
sweet compassion of Thy face.'

—from an Hindu play

By the Same Author

Short Stories

THE WALL OF DUST (Secker & Warburg)

Travel

TITO LIFTS THE CURTAIN (Rider)

Biography

SAINT ON THE MARCH (Gollancz)

HALLAM TENNYSON

*The  
Dark  
Goddess*



*London*

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TO MY PARENTS

A first repayment for years of help,  
encouragement and trust.

# PART ONE



# One

**T**WO fat men opposite each other on wicker seats: two fat men in fine muslin dhotis, fondling fat ankles the texture of fawn-coloured silk. Evidence of evening as plump and prompt as Dutch figures in a weather clock. Evidence, too, of Sen Street's respectability. In Sen Street we have time to sit as well as stools to sit on. Disaster cannot move us: famine, pestilence, and floods leave us still unharmed. Death and the monsoon? From those none but the Gods go free. But when we are burnt to ashes, two more will be found to take our place. Two more sedentary guardians of Calcutta's culture, still centres of a burning world.

Joan Raydon's walk had the nervous athletic thrust of British tweed exercising dogs on a windy hill. But she disliked dogs, especially the kind that needed exercising, and instead of tweeds she was wearing a white cotton overall. In fact Joan was returning from a couple of anxious hours spent with her drainage project in the Calcutta slums. She was thirty-five and it was more than twelve years since she had visited the Sussex vicarage in which she was brought up.

Some ten yards behind her glided Nilu and Chitra, two of the students to whom she lectured on sociology at Calcutta University. The loose indolence of silk *saris* lingered round *them* as they moved, while, to add a touch of court pageantry to their progress, one of the slum children bore on his head the bucket of utensils they had used in their demonstration of improved cookery.

At the corner of Sen Street Joan stopped. This was the point at which smells converged: cow-dung, bad drains, dust and mustard oil from the slums; cow-dung, bay leaves, butter and sweetmeats from Sen Street. The contrast never failed to surprise her. Outraged some deep-rooted principle of neatness. Slums, yes. But slums right

under the noses of the well-to-do—it was that she minded. How could the well-to-do stomach it? Why didn't they do something? Even after eight years India still struck her as indecent.

Joan lifted her face. She saw human progress as a filmed battle sequence, troops pouring recklessly out of the screen. Every new advance meant risking the gulf at one's feet. Yet if one stopped to look at it, how would one ever find courage to cross the gulf? A London School of Economics degree in the uncomplicated 'thirties, when to be serious and modern was to be morally on the side of the elect—Joan had been away from home too long to realise that such things made her one of the lost tribe. She set off defiantly towards the hostel at the far end.

At what exact point she grew conscious of the object lying in the middle of the narrow road she did not know. Afterwards she thought she had noticed it for several seconds but that, for some reason, she had failed to bring its familiar blur into any relation with what she was doing. Then—almost too late—it impinged. She stumbled. The object moved, raised itself clumsily on its knees and flicked its tail. Two faces, seemingly impaled on its horns, gazed sadly down at her. Joan was alarmed. If the nightmare had lasted an instant longer she would (so she admitted to herself afterwards) probably have done something foolish. But then, quite suddenly, it was over. The cow wiggled its buttocks and sidled in mincing fashion up the pavement. The faces, detaching themselves from its horns, were seen to belong to Gan Babu's father and to a rice merchant of renowned stupidity: two harmless old fuddy-duddies who sat out, every evening for a sunset scrutiny of the passers-by.

Joan cleared her throat and stood waiting for the two girls.

"Dear girls," she murmured to them in English, "do you really have to be so impossibly slow?" Her face wore a frown, an underlip, and a general air of high, but difficult, purpose.

As a matter of fact, as faces go, Joan's was not particularly "tweedy." It was too original for that. The dark eyes, thick, well-shaped eyebrows and broad mouth were as fascinating and sexless as a gipsy queen's. The hair was pinned on top in loose curls like an untidy mantilla. Yet to balance the hint of wildness, Joan's face had an unusual symmetry, which is rare in all but the plainest and tweediest of faces. And it was this which gave strength, normality, a firm English framework to what might otherwise have seemed disturbingly "foreign." Even her one mole was placed dead centre at the tip of her chin like the knob at the end of a lemon.

India had improved Joan's face. Instead of the sallow stain common among Western migrants Joan had the glow of lightly polished oak. Her skin at least seemed to have some natural affinity for the East. Age had improved her, too. Lack of the fleshy bits no longer seemed such a disadvantage. Slender, muscular hands, ballet-dancer's legs—these now added to character what they once subtracted from femininity. And although her face was prematurely lined—she had never bothered with face creams—her firm, dazzling teeth clinched the impression of bony, ageless beauty.

The Sen Street Hostel was in a state of advanced decay. In the year since she had been warden Joan had twice suggested that it be redecorated. The Hostels' Superintendent merely looked wildly shocked at the idea as if she had said something obscene. What is a house but a fleeting signature scratched on the sands of eternity? Why should a signature, with all its flourish of stucco and wrought iron, ever be re-written? But though shabby, the hostel was at least cool. The enclosed courtyard caught breezes and cut off sun. Round it on the ground floor a cloistered colonnade

fronted office cubicles. This acted as an unofficial Junior Common Room. The students gathered there on mats, ate round it, even slept round it when nights were hottest; for being barred, and not stoppered with glass, the office windows let in the air.

At the moment the courtyard was empty. The girls just back from lectures were taking their evening shower. Bright, wet *saris* hung over the balconies to dry. Giggles, the splash of water, music scratched from a portable gramophone—these were some of the sounds that gathered a gentle resonance as they fell through the hollow well.

Joan stood at the heavy street door listening. The invisible noise excluded her, but she did not worry. Above her head a voice crossed from one balcony to the next. Giggles. Another voice replied. More giggles. Unable to understand the Bengali at such a distance Joan lightly assumed the laughter directed at herself—which it wasn't—and launched away from her moorings by the door.

Asha was down of course. She had her bath at mid-day and now sat concealed in cloistral shadow while one of her inexhaustible brood of nephews hunted for nits in her long straight hair.

"*Jo-Di*," Asha gave the title—short for "elder sister Joan"—a sweet, yet commanding, inflection. "*Ekhane esho, Jo-Di*. Come here a moment. . . ." If she was in you could be sure that Asha had a spare eye on the gate.

The University produced Asha when Joan made it clear that she herself would have nothing to do with the hostel's catering. She was somebody's second cousin's widowed sister-in-law.

"Chitu, fetch *Didi* some water," for Asha still hoped to persuade the warden to submit to the leisurely ritual of the Indian toilet.

"No, no—carry on, Chitu. I'm going upstairs to wash."

"But there's someone come, *Didi*. Forgot his name. A reporter-torter, he said. Don't know what he wants,

though. Drains, perhaps. I put him in the front office." Asha had a grating, staccato voice. It gave the musical slur of Bengali an unaccustomed tang.

• Some distance away the first conch shell vibrated in valediction to the setting sun. In an instant every Hindu housewife was at her doorway churning the limp air in shattering chorus. Asha was late. She knotted her bun with black ribbon. Under her tight bodice the breasts of a child winow, inappropriate and firm, quivered with the swift, soft motion of her arms. Asha was as near as an Indian woman can get to being unfeminine: and that was not very near.

Drains again. How maddening. Ever since the Communist press published their fictitious interview, the air had been saturated with drains. British Woman Accuses Corporation. Plutocracy's Hand Must Be Forced, says Jane Randell. Not only had they hopelessly bungled her name, they had bungled her job as well. "... Comrade to toiling masses of Mother India and head of Anthropology Department, Calcutta University," when everyone knew that there was no Department of Anthropology at Calcutta University—nor anywhere else in India for that matter. The publicity had already done them harm. The rest of the Calcutta press had started circling round her drains like vultures, digging up all sorts of unlikely stories as a result. Where on earth did they find that fiction about a mass strike of city scavengers, for instance? Nogen Dutt? She had waved the report in his face this evening, but Nogen only nibbled inscrutably at another biscuit and continued to press down the thumb prints of illiterate volunteers.

She was quite sure, of course, that Nogen was the real source of the bogus interview." But so far she had not accused him directly of it. She did not want a quarrel. It was Nogen's fanatical enthusiasm that had made a revolutionary "project" out of her first ideas. And now, without his technical knowledge, the whole scheme would collapse. What matter if he did turn out to be a

Communist so long as she was able to prevent the Party from making political capital from the fact. Joan faced the Party single-handed with equanimity. She would ride bare-back to Kailash dressed as a Hindu hermit (bad as she was at disguises) were such an exploit proved beyond reasonable doubt to be necessary to the future improvement of Calcutta's sewage.

The conches blared. Evening worship began in a thousand temples. Opposite the Hostel gates a priest waved burning tapers in front of the image of Kali, while cymbals, drums, and flutes spun a golden thread of melody out of the boiling cauldron of crude sound.

Kali the black goddess, with her garland of skulls and her scimitar (probably cut from an old petrol tin): Kali the destroyer, red tongue slobbering, eyes staring out from some aboriginal nightmare, one arm holding a severed head. Kali the bloody and turbulent image projected by Indian impotence. . . .

Watching Joan sitting there quietly on the edge of the courtyard, one might imagine that she had submitted to the blast of unity that battered the city at sunset. Wrongly. Joan was massing her forces to combat the darkness. She had switched on the powerful beam of thought. . . . One day India will master this gruesome fear of the earth and Kali will sink back into the primeval forest from which she came. One day Temples shall be turned into clinics and shrines into health centres. . . .

4

The man in her office was on the floor, his head twisted round and back in order to trap the last light with a book held an inch from his nose. All contorted sinew and bone, he looked like a piece of wire sculpture. She couldn't see his face but she knew at once from the posture who it was.

"Krishna !"

"Yes, Joan—it's me again."

"Again ? But I haven't seen you for ages—"



“‘I grow old . . . I grow old . . . I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled’” and Krishna patted the narrow protuberance oddly growing from the middle of his gaunt figure, and smoothed the crumpled folds of his loincloth. Poetry, especially T. S. Eliot, was one of the many things they didn't have in common.

She tried to find out if there was any particular reason for his visit. But Krishna Barmerjee was as oblique as ever. He told her that he had left the permanent staff of the NATION, her uncle's newspaper. But she knew that already.

“If you've come about my drains, I'm afraid you will be disappointed. I've sworn not to give another single word to the press.”

At this, standing dramatically still in the middle of the room, Krishna raised his head, drooped the corners of his mouth and half-closed his eyes. Then he took a deep breath as if starting a *yoga* exercise. This power of abstraction was genuine: that was why it didn't exasperate Joan. Once when he went on a special mission for the NATION he had telegraphed the office on arrival asking to be reminded why he had been sent. That was true; she'd been working in the office at the time. Suddenly Krishna opened his eyes:

“Let's sit outside. It's cooler.”

Asha paddled up and left them her newly lighted wick. In the kitchen *luchis* were plunged into boiling fat for supper. Two students leaned over the balcony, hair falling into dusk. Krishna took out a grubby paper packet, rolled *areca* nut into a *betel* leaf and pinned the concoction with a clove.

“Drains,” he murmured. “You must explain all about your drains. Life as Operation Sewage I can understand. But I'm afraid my practical plumbing is poor—”

“I've only got about ten minutes,” Joan said, primly. “I'm afraid I've no time to be philosophical.”

“Patience. Patience.” Then he flapped a hand at Chitra who had just come down the stairs. Chitra stood

over them demurely while Krishna took a first munch of *betel*. "Does the Warden teach patience as part of her sociology course?" Chitra's English was not good. She looked from one to the other with a nervous giggle. "There," Krishna, placidly licked his fingers. "I thought she didn't. But she ought to. Patience is more necessary to social workers than a knowledge of Factory Acts or the Laws of Social Change. Especially in India. Without it you'll all end with stomach ulcers—"

As always Joan was provoked to justify herself. She was not really impatient, she said. She hadn't, for example, lost her temper for more than three years. But she must think of her time schedule. The University had agreed that practical social work should be part of their studies: they had to go to the slums again immediately after supper. Mothercraft, cookery, hygiene, home-nursing—

Krishna, lips puckered, steel-rimmed spectacles awry appeared to be studying some imaginary document at the tip of his nose. Then he held up his hand. "Joan, sewage must wait. I have a story to tell you." And to Chitra: "When the Prime Minister calls tell him the Warden is busy."

Being Krishna's, the story was complicated. It was about his "cousin-sister," Kolyani, brought up with him in their joint family, some seventy miles from Calcutta. Kolyani had the large, formalised face of Mauryan sculpture. A face made for repose and sadness. Almond eyes sloping upwards at the corners, a mouth shaped like Rama's bow—hers was the perfect classical beauty. Just what the scriptures ordered. But before independence—so corrupted had Indian taste become by ideas imported from Europe—her face was thought no more than "interesting."

As Krishna's nasal tones dipped unemphatically onwards Joan found herself gradually drawn in. As usual his uneven accent and the jerky rhythm of his voice were a fascinating contrast to the brilliant fluency of his English.

At first, half of her was saying "Hurry, for Heaven's sake, hurry," and planning the evening's work in the slums. But Krishna's methods, though oblique, were effective.

• He told of Kolyani, a brilliant M.A., whose English poetry had been praised by Laurence Binyon, shaking the moons out of India's leading women's journal. Then her marriage—not "arranged" as 90 per cent of Hindu marriages still were, even when they involved M.A.s—but a love match. Robbi Das Gupta, the artist, giving up a life of dissipation for her sake. Carried beyond himself by her beauty, painting a series of visions with Kolyani as Durga, the ten-armed Mother Goddess: changing a nation's taste in women by his passion for her face. Then falling sudden as a spent rocket. In a few months squandering every penny of his success on drink. Kolyani endlessly scheming to keep him dry. Kolyani going from door to door pleading her husband's cause with indignant relatives, begging for work, for one more chance. And Robbi, whenever he was sober enough, rewarding his wife with blows, morbidly jealous even when she visited the bazaar, hurling at her wild accusations of treachery . . . Kolyani reduced to a few soiled *aris*, trying to shield from the children the full horror of their father's condition . . . Kolyani consumptive, heading for an early death unless her situation could be improved.

Joan tried to interrupt but Krishna held up his hand. He had a plan. He was going to persuade Kolyani to take a six-months' rest. If she could find a temporary job which would give her enough money to keep her two youngest, then the other children might stay with Robbi's sister and Robbi stay with him. Kolyani would have to work anonymously, of course, for once Robbi found out where she was he'd stop at nothing to force her back again. While Kolyani was away Krishna planned to get Robbi tucked up safe in an inebriates' home, in the hope that after six months' freedom, she would accept the arrangement as being for the best.

He was touchingly proud of his plan. Unused to the world of human relations he gave it to Joan with all the naïve anxiety of a boy introducing his first love to a critical parent. "What do you think about it? Will it work? Tell me what you think—"

"It sounds terribly complicated. Why can't she divorce him? After all the new Bill will be ready soon—"

Krishna shook his head and intoned at her in Sanscrit, then translated: "'As the shadow to the substance so to Lord is faithful wife and she parts not from her husband till she parts with fleeting life.' That's what Sita said 4,000 years ago—"

"Oh, bother, bother, bother. When *will* your women realise that they owe a duty to society as well as to their wretched husbands? I have the same trouble here every week. It's the sheer waste that's so heart-breaking—"

"Aha," he said, "the waste." There was a sardonic note in his voice as he leaned back again out of the lamplight. Since they had been talking dusk had carried out its swift and faultless ambush. "Have you seen this deputation of European Socialist women doing the rounds? They'll be visiting the hostel soon, I've no doubt. They all wear a fixed comradely smile as if it was some sort of Party badge. One of them was upset at the way we let cows die a natural death. What a waste, she said. I agreed. But I asked her what would happen to the vultures if we didn't. After all, the corpse of the sacred cow is their staple article of diet. The comradely smile became rather pained at that—as if her mouth was full of pins. How exasperating India must be for people with tidy minds—" And he blinked and looked away.

Would she understand what he was trying to say? She stood up: "Really, Krishna, it's a miracle that you and I are still on speaking terms. I suppose I only keep on in the hope of discovering whether you really are as awful as you pretend—"

Lights hollowed the opposite cloister where Asha had appeared bearing an enormous bowl of rice and chanting "Come and eat" in the rhythmic monotone of a call to prayer. Joan searched her Gladstone bag for the evening assortment of pills. "I really am awfully sorry about Kolyani. I only wish I could help—"

"Your uncle has a job going in the Delhi office. An experimental job. A children's column for the NATION. Kolyani could do it."

"Have you spoken to him?"

"I'd rather you did."

"But surely you know him well enough?"

"If I didn't know him, I might. But I do, so I can't. After all not even his enemies deny Sir Fleetwood the gift of the gab."

"Yes, I suppose Kolyani wouldn't remain anonymous for long—"

"You see?"

"But Krishna, my uncle and I get on so badly—"

"He still calls you St. Joan of Sen Street."

"Only because he is no respecter of saints."

"All the same it might be worth trying."

"Oh, yes. I suppose so. If you *really* want it—"

A minute later she watched him stump off towards the gate in a parody of a middle-aged walk. He held his head high, peering from side to side like a short-sighted cormorant. She felt a special, but rather patronising affection. He was lazy, speculative, "detached," in every way just what she deplored. After each meeting she thought "poor old Krishna, he really is utterly hopeless." And yet—. Perhaps it was loyalty that drew her. For after all he was the person who had made it possible for her to come to India, who had put her in touch with her uncle and taken her under his wing when she arrived. But no—it was more than just loyalty. There *was* a special quality about him—hard as it might be to describe it. Perhaps it had something to do with his short-

sightedness. He was so "clever"—yet somehow at the same time, so naïve.

• Supper. A sleepy shuffle of students' slippers spattered the stone stairways.

## 5

Joan squatted on the centre mat, upright, uncomfortable, rather rigidly smiling. She placed her pills carefully round the rim of her brass plate. Purple *iodoform* against dysentery, *paludrin* to suppress malaria, chocolate-coated *multivits* as a more general safeguard. Then she raked the billowing cocoon of silk and muslin stretched on either side of the cloister. "I believe every one of you girls has forgotten her pills again."

Twenty-five faces turned to the Warden, polite, round-eyed, attentive. The students admired her because she was English and accepted her because she did not exploit the fact. But they could not be persuaded to take her fierce hatred of illness at all seriously.

"Three at once seems such an awful bother, *Jo-Di*."

"But surely much less of a bother than being ill—"

At first they had quaffed a daily glass of milk until the local supply was found to be heavily watered. Then Joan had bombarded the university for six whole months to obtain a free issue of preventive pills. Soon, perhaps, an American institute would condemn one of the pillular trinity as outdated and the attack would once more shift direction.

The students scattered in search of pills.

Asha, having sidled up the cloister ladling out rice, was now crouched at the far end, fist to mouth, watching them feed. It was one of the conventions of Hindu widowhood that the widow, as if out of penance for still being allowed to live, should eat her meagre meal when the others had finished. The custom annoyed Joan. It meant that Asha sat on alone among the fragments left by the students, delaying the clearing up.

"Get a mat for your aunt, Chitu. There's plenty of room for her to start."

It was an old argument. Asha did not even reply. She merely laid a restraining hand on her nephew's arm. Then she counter-attacked: "You were late this evening, *Didi*. How are the drains?" Using the English word "drains" she gave it a mischievous emphasis. Ever since the "practical" work had started Asha had been sceptical. She took pains to make it clear that she was not impressed because silk-clad daughters of the rich glided out to graceful acts of charity.

Joan, this evening, did not want to talk about the drains in front of her students. "You know that scouring powder Nilu took? One of the mothers thought it was flour and rolled it backwards and forwards for thirty minutes trying to make bread from it. Of course it wouldn't stick. She complained that the merchants must be mixing powdered chalk with the flour again."

"We take scouring powder? The slum women can't even afford soap. Ashes and lemon do just as well. And they don't take the shine off brass."

"You must go with the girls. You could show the mothers how to use it—"

This time it was Asha's turn to retreat to a fresh position. "Gan Babu's wife had her baby last night. I went to visit her. She's orthodox. She won't allow visitors. Not for ten days. I only saw through the key-hole. The kid looks weak. Like an unwatered seedling—"

"Oh bother these caste restrictions. Gan Babu ought to know better."

"It's his wife. It's her idea. Our girls could teach her—"

"I thought we were unpopular enough in Sen Street already."

"People don't understand what we're doing, *Didi*. If we worked in Sen Street they might understand better."

"I'm training girls to be social workers, Asha, not religious reformers. Ignorance, poverty, disease, hunger—"

they are our province. But *Gan Babu's* religious prejudice—I don't see how outsiders can go meddling with that. . . ." Their voices had edged imperceptibly towards argument. Joan, noticing the unusual attentiveness from the corridor of black heads bowed over brass dinner plates, briskly switched the subject. "Who's on the rota this evening? Hurry up, then, or we'll be late. . . ."

There was a small figure at the hostel gate. Very cautiously, as if handling a time bomb, it pushed an envelope towards Joan. It had glistening black braids looped over each ear and a prim, disapproving face like a squeezed orange. "*Gan Babu's* eldest daughter," Asha called out watching, as usual, from the cloister.

Waiting for her three students to finish rinsing their hands, Joan opened the letter:

Reverend Madam,

Your action of the 15th inst. does not pass unnoticed. It is action insulting to all Hindus. Cow is our sacred mother. To kick same is not to any person or persons permitted. Love of sacred mother is sacred tradition with Hindus. It teaches kinship of whole animal kingdom. I have information that this is not the case in your honoured country. But in your honoured country it would be bad if Indian visitor perhaps kicks dog. In view of fact that you choose to construct your abode here in bosom of beloved Bharat, I trust you should give honoured observance to customs dear to our hearts and sacred to our feelings—

As if anyone can genuinely believe that she deliberately engineered her wretched encounter with the cow! It's merely *Gan Babu* twisting what his father told him so as to harass the hotel. Sen Street has always disliked the university taking it over. Joan shoved the letter angrily into her Gladstone bag where it stayed wedged between the pages of Krumpacker's "Population Problems of the Near and Far East." She was not going



to get involved in a squabble. One really hadn't the time for such things.

Her Sen Street face was determined. She strode past the peeling pink stucco, the twisted iron balustrades, more firmly and decisively than ever.

## Two

HER uncle's house looked as if it was washed daily in Persil. The marble façade sparkled: the filigree plaster between veranda pillars was as bland as starched lace. Each blade of grass, each petal of cyclamen, each stone on the gravel drive seemed polished till it shone like metal. The interior was as cool and simple and expensive as a film-star's swimming pool.

This evening there was a string of waiting rickshaws in the road outside, a dozen smart cars crowded along the gravel drive. Caught in a ray of evening light a sherry glass leaped like a sword blade from an upper window. Joan stopped. She had evidently chosen one of her uncle's post-monsoon parties for her visit. She was relieved; it gave her an excuse to turn back.

Too late. Aunt Fredegonde had already spotted her from the top of the marble stairs where she stood flanked by turbaned servants. Her aunt was a striking figure and the picture showed signs of careful composition. The Empress Irene, Mid Byzantine Slaves, Receives Lavoys from Disordered Rome. A fierce crest of hair sprang from her domelike forehead and magnificently boned face like silver flames round a zodiac sun. Large, knobbly limbs were hung with a garment suggesting fishing tackle looped in loose tiers. She believed this dress to be similar to that worn by the Patrician ladies of classical antiquity and thus "the nearest our own civilisation has ever come to the exquisite business of the *sari*." Yet in spite of such

careful exoticism, Lady Raydon had never quite dispelled an atmosphere of North Oxford and horse-hair furniture/ nor exorcised the ghost of the eminent Victorian philologist from whom, in his pedantic old age, she had sprung.

"Joan darling—how perfectly gorgeous. I'm so glad I reminded Fleetwood to ask you," the white lie echoed with a note of wild sincerity.

"I'm sorry, Aunt Fredegonde, I didn't know it was one of your orgies—"

"You didn't? Then Fleetwood must have forgotten. Naughty, naughty boy. But then he is so busy. We mustn't scold him. I'll take you to him myself. 'You ought to be ashamed, Fleetwood, forgetting to ask dear Joan. You know I never see her.' That's what we'll tell him."

But they didn't. Behind Joan was one of Sir Fleetwood's "darling little finds," all silks, jewels, flowers, and pretty excitement. Lady Raydon descended to invest her with determination. Sir Fleetwood's interest in his "finds" rarely went further than a patted hand or tweaked cheek. The credit was his wife's. She grappled them to her own soul with such ardour that Sir Fleetwood, who disagreed with her taste on principle, had no choice but to lose interest. "I brought her here? My dear woman, what reckless accusations you hurl at me. I never could abide musical boxes. It's so maddening the way they repeat themselves." And the two old warriors would exchange smiles of complacent triumph, each believing they had turned the tables on the other.

Sir Fleetwood was the only surviving relative of Joan's father. Until India Joan had never met him, for he had fled England before the First World War. Scandal with the wife of a V.I.P. But then, as Lady Raydon said, "brilliant men like Fleetwood must have their peccadilloes. And it's that touch of foreign brilliance that our dowdy old island could never quite understand."

In 1920 he collared the editorship of the NATION. Soon he had several weeklies and quarterlies under his

thumb as well. In 1912 a knighthood was added for good measure. Since Independence tactful anticipation of the new State's policies had preserved his eminence. Throughout a dim Sussex childhood Joan's maternal aunts had cast the glamour of disapproval over her unknown uncle.

Yet now it was only his absurd wife for whom she felt affection. Not that Lady Raydon was anything but madly irritating. Her much publicised adoration of India for instance. "Yes, that's a photograph of our dear cook reading the Ramayan. Your uncle and I never employ anyone but Brahmins. India's the one country in the world where one's servants can always be gentlefolk. India alone understands the eugenics of spirituality." That was the evening of Joan's arrival. Such pie-faced grandiloquence at a first greeting was too much. Joan had turned to look at the garden, where the velvet cushion of turf was drenched by mechanically swivelling spray and the scarlet cannas, crammed in a central star-shaped bed, were touched with vulgar phosphorescence by the setting sun.

On either side linked wall to garden wall, were the homes of other British business men and civil servants—for that was 1915, the last days of colonial rule—complacent cocoons where soda siphons softly exploded and hearts murmured "Surbiton—Surbiton—Surbiton" to the indifferent stars. On the boat from Egypt Joan had met enough *Mem Sahibs* to be glad that her aunt was so unlike them.

As for her uncle—well, there he was now, benevolence plastered thick as grease-paint over his high-coloured face. In an instant he had detected his niece and came towards her, briskly shouldering his three score years and ten.

"Aha, so we've enticed you out of your gloomy cavern of good works to watch us poor sybarites at play."

Joan had arrived in a white overall, looking like a last-year medical student doing the rounds. Her large dusty

feet were thrust into open sandals. "I'm afraid I'm a discredit to you, Uncle. You see, I've dashed here straight from the slums; I've come on business really—"

Sir Fleetwood piloted his niece across the floor. "Your aunt always will invite the most alarming specimens. If only Bacchus would bull-doze them together it would be all right. But of course the Indians may all be swindlers, but they are much too virtuous to drink. So they stand about in corners sniffing at each others rumps like well-bred dogs. While as for the *Sahibs*—" and here Sir Fleetwood beamed cheerfully round at the company, his monocle fixed into a bright and lecherous eye. "No, on second thoughts, dear girl, I shan't let you get away with it so easily. If you gate-crash you must pay an entrance fee." And with this he darted quickly to the far side of the room.

"Well, well, Mattie old boy—stationed near the drinks as usual—"

"Och, it's poor Hughie here. He's for the land flowing with milk and water on Monday—"

"With whiskey Bombay was always terrible enough—but without it—" Hughie expressively licked his moustache.

"Aye, and to think when I first struck the noble city it was only two rupees a bottle—"

"Yes, in those days—*Facilis descensus Falerno*," said Sir Fleetwood delighted at the anxious smiles with which they pretended to follow his joke.

"Today you're flipping lucky to find it on the Black Market at rupees 40—"

"Ah, well—Governments must persecute somebody otherwise they'd go out of business. And now, gentlemen, I'm going to leave my niece in your charge. She is very serious and sociological. She can tell you all about Calcutta's slums. Everything you exploiters of India's poor ought to know about your victims, but don't." And with that Sir Fleetwood let his monocle fall against his embroidered waistcoat and was gone.

Joan embarked on a lecture. The increase in immigrants from the countryside among industrial workers: the widening gap between new housing and population growth: the utter inadequacy of sewage. Her audience stared at their sherry, emitting embarrassed grunts. It was not till Joan caught sight of Krishna that she realised suddenly how out of place she was.

Krishna was standing alone staring out of the window and smoking a cigarette. Every so often, he lifted a hand in slow motion and removed a shred of tobacco from his lips with an air of fastidious delicacy. His gaze did not waver. Someone leaned over the drink table to ask him a question. Krishna swivelled slowly round like a tortoise, then collapsed downwards towards his questioner. The question was repeated. Krishna shook his head, then gathered himself up again into the same abstracted trance. Perhaps he had been asked where the toilet was. It was certainly hard to believe that he himself was not one of the room's immovable fixtures.

Joan stopped abruptly. Hughie lumbered into the pause: "The wife and I tried Simla for our furlough this year, Miss Raydon. Have you ever tried Simla?"

"No, I'm afraid not."

"You ought to. Clean as Frinton-on-Sea. Gardens full of sweet peas. Dancing in the evenings. A really lovely little job."

Joan was anxious to repair the damage. After all it was selfish to make no effort at all at party small talk: "Dancing? How interesting. What type would that be?"

"Oh, nothing very special. Just the jolly old one-two, three-chassé to the right, you know."

"I see. Then I suppose their instruments must be different—"

"No-o, I don't think so. Just the jolly old trombone and sax—"

"Really? I never realised the Hill people used European instruments. But then I'm afraid I'm practically tone deaf—"

It was Matthieson who retrieved the conversation from further disaster: "I think, Hughie old chap, you and Miss Raydon have got your wires just a wee bitty crossed—"

Joan was glad that she had come now. It was good sometimes to be reminded how little she had in common with Calcutta's other Europeans. It made the loneliness of Sen Street easier to bear and restored her sense of missionary purpose.

It was not until Sir Fleetwood, paused in the middle of the room to light a cheroot, that Joan saw her chance: "All right, dear girl, I'll come quietly. Your Aunt Mimi has joined battle now. Yes, I think we can safely leave the field to your Aunt Mimi." Sir Fleetwood pronounced his wife's nickname in a way that made perfectly clear his scepticism of the French ancestry to which she sometimes laid claim. Her neo-Gothic aunt from North Oxford affected the exotic. Her half-foreign uncle, Anglo-Saxon common-sense. It was difficult to imagine their meeting-ground. Perhaps it lay in mutely calling each other's bluff.

The party settled down resignedly into its component halves. For the last twenty years Sir Fleetwood's house had been one of the few private homes where Indians and Westerners regularly met. But the meeting had never been easy and this evening it was going through a seasonal eclipse. There was a crisis. Britain had been high-falutin' about India's claim to Goa. Old animosities troubled the air, tapping a ghostly drum.

Did you read Raydon's editorial in the NATION this week? . . . The one on Goa you mean? . . . Don't see that he need have accused THE TIMES of telling lies . . . I agree. One doesn't expect that sort of thing from one of our own chaps . . . No, but then of course, after all, Raydon is not exactly—I mean I've heard he's . . . Not British? Yes, I'd heard that, too . . . I don't know what truth there is in it, of course, but they say his parents were Russians or Jews or something . . . Yes, as a matter of fact he told a chap I know that his family started

with a junk shop in the East End and finished up by advising the King on his art collections . . . I suppose they changed their name . . . Must have. They could hardly have come up in the world if they'd still been called Schweinkopf or Wizzoffsky or something . . . But Lady Raydon is not—? I mean she seems so . . . Oh, no, I don't think she is. Her brother was very high in the I.C.S. out here. They've only been married about twelve years . . . All the same, wherever he comes from, old Raydon's a damned amusing fellow . . . Yes, a bit too amusing. That's what's wrong with a lot of 'em. . . .

2

A bead curtain. Two bronze *Apsaras*. A large board patterned with the labels of different brands of cigars. Nearly three hundred framed photographs of friends and celebrities—each of which could provoke him to mimicry and anecdote never once repeated before the same audience. A smell of perpetual shadow. This was Sir Fleetwood's Holy of Holies.

"So you want me to do you a favour, dear child? Well, well, well—how unexpected. And, dare I say, how charming?"

"No, not a favour, Uncle. She's really worth employing. Here—you can see how gifted she is. I wouldn't have come if she wasn't." And Joan opened her Gladstone bag and handed him some loose sheets.

"'Crying Govinda, Govinda under the tattered moon,'" Sir Fleetwood murmured, quoting the one feeble line from the poem lying on top. "Well, I suppose you're right. That's the sort of stuff poor old Binyon might have liked. Early Naidu and water." Then he handed the papers back without looking at them further. "Shall we say that I'm delighted to do your friend a favour, then? Is that more acceptable?" How expert he was at exploding her personal myth of integrity.

Joan angrily buckled her brief case. "She doesn't want

favours. She wants an income. If she can't earn one from the beginning her brother plans to send a weekly cheque through whatever office she's working for so that she thinks it's salary. In her eyes economic advantage is the one justification for taking the plunge—"

"Well, well—the plot thickens. No—I certainly shan't refuse my rôle in your delicious Sen Street melodrama—"

"Melodrama? It all seems perfectly straightforward to me—"

"But in India, my dear, nothing is ever quite what it seems. We still have to teach you that."

"Oh, don't bother, Uncle—" (she was determined not to show her annoyance) "you tried hard enough on the NATION."

"So my editorials are as unpopular as ever?"

"I only see them occasionally—"

"Aha—one of our lost fifty thousand—" And blandly ignoring Joan's obvious desire to leave, Sir Fleetwood launched into a dissertation. "Yes, my dear, you'll no doubt be glad to hear that our readership is not merely falling—it's plunging in a spiral nose-dive. For one thing it's difficult to go on serving two masters when both masters seem to have relinquished their post. There may be more Britons in the country than ever before. But what Britons! At least the old I.C.S. *wallahs* showed an occasional gleam of what one hopefully took for intelligence. But these business men are immersed in total darkness. As for the educated Indian,—well of course he's got thoroughly cold feet about English. He feels ashamed nowadays if he's caught reading anything but some stinking vernacular rag—"

Sir Fleetwood told his tale of woe with great relish, smacking his waistcoat at each revelation as if at a good dinner. Suddenly he leaped up, "But come on There's my mad Colonel. That's his voice—like a French horn stuffed with feathers. If we ply him with sherry he'll tell us about Tubby Thompson of the 43rd. Poor old Tubby. Pipped himself off, ye know. Never could understand it."



A useful slow bowler. Quick as a cat after pig. Must 'ave been missin' his cricket.' Come on, dear girl, I must have you meet my Colonel—"

"I'm sorry, Uncle, I'm afraid—"

"Nonsense. As your nearest living relative I insist. My Colonel's an object lesson to the sensible young." Sir Fleetwood parted the bead curtains, clutching his niece by the elbow—"You see it's the rationalists, not the lunatics who come to a sticky end in India, my dear. In the old days the slogan was Christianity and higher education. Now it's Marx, psycho-analysis, and the welfare state. But the result will be just the same. Idealist, Sir Quondam, K.C.B., B.A., I.C.S., retired. Hobbies: disillusion and Bengal tummy. No, my dear, India will never conform to any of Sir Quondam's blue-prints. She's too old, too tough, too wise and much too wicked—"

They had just reached the head of the stairs, when Lady Raydon charged: "Now what *have* you two been doing? I've been hunting for Joan everywhere. Mrs. Chatterjee is here and longing to meet her—"

"But Aunt—"

"Joan is coming with her uncle—"

"Be quiet Fleetwood—"

"But Aunt—"

"No, dee-ar, but me no buts—"

"I'M SORRY, Aunt Fredegonde, I SIMPLY MUST GO." And Joan turned to escape.

"But, dee-ar, it's *the* Mrs. Chatterjee—her husb—" Lady Raydon's voice trailed off into a gasp of horror. Joan, not realising how close to the head of the stairs her aunt had driven them, missed the first step. Her muscular legs shot out from underneath her. Then, wearing an expression of controlled surprise, she slid rapidly to the bottom. Throughout the voyage she had clutched her bag like a tobogganer clinging to her partner's back.

Joan rose very carefully to her feet. Half-way behind

her stood her aunt, arms outstretched: "Joan, darling—how frightful. How perfectly frightful. You must have hurt yourself terribly—"

"Of course I didn't. It's your marble stairs. They're too well polished."

Then before the stunned silence had time to break Joan stalked slowly and with great dignity to the front door. She did not look back.

Every inch of her was alive with pain. It needed a great effort to control her face. And it was not until she was outside and felt the gravel under her feet that she realised both her sandals had come off in the fall. She dared not risk going back. Besides she was used to being barefoot.

3

"No, my good woman, I refuse to let you be sentimental about it. The girl's a prig. Why she hadn't even the grace to admit that she had hurt herself. Our staircase indeed—Oh, yes, I know it's slippery—but did you see the way she said it? That toss of the head and what-can-you-expect-from-a-plutocrat look! She's really impossible, Mimi. A hopeless, incurable prig—" Then Sir Fleetwood added with relish: "I always knew she would be, of course. It was the cruellest thing Harcourt ever did—leaving the child with his wife's desiccated Anglican aunts. She'll waste her whole life getting over it. Of course the poor lad was already at the Front when his wife died. It wasn't long before he was killed, in fact. I suppose one shouldn't hold him responsible for his actions at such a time—even in lucid moments he was always incurably romantic."

4

Krishna's servant, Arjun, was waiting for her with a note and a parcel when she got in from the slums. The parcel contained two pairs of sandals—her old ones, both with broken straps—and a new pair. The note was silly,

something about a glass slipper and everyone being too stunned by her dramatic exit from the ball to catch her before she reached the bus-stop.

Joan glanced at the new sandals. They were as heavy as a rhino's muzzle and expensively embroidered with gold thread. Clearly suitable for a farmer on his wedding day—in India women were not expected to have feet her size. They reminded her of other inappropriate presents Krishna had bought in the past—criminally expensive bouquets of orchids (how she disliked them); hand-coloured engravings of Indian art. But that had been during her early days in India—she thought she had cured him of such habits.

## Three

MOST of the inhabitants of Calcutta's slums—railway workers, factory hands, dustmen, or dockers—are countrymen. Regularly, to the discomfort of employers, they disappear into the interior to visit their wives and families. Appropriately then, for the *bustee*-slums themselves to have the haphazard, unhurried contours of a village. Lanes loop erratically round *neem* willows once planted to protect a wealthy house from malaria. Behind the row of insanitary shacks which have long supplanted the house lies a superb old bathing tank with marble steps and, at their head, a gnarled asoka tree still flaming against the winter sky. Then, gradually, this leisurely ramble of poverty disappears. The tank is riddled with squatters; the asoka tree is hung with sacking to make a house. Goats, cows, and buffaloes are crowded out. Without these hard-working scavengers filth accumulates.

It was just over a year ago since Joan's drainage project started. It was towards the end of the monsoon, when she

was visiting a bustee with some students giving cholera inoculations. They were paddling down a back street in a squelching filth too offensive in smell and touch to be the usual Bengal mud. Calling at the street's only cement house they found the same glutinous slime spewing over its floor. Asked what had happened the housewife shrugged her shoulders. This was the third time running. Nothing could be done about it till after the Festival holidays. The sewage overflowed as soon as the heavy rain started. They had to walk about in the year's excreta.

Joan inspected the sewage. Discovered that the corporation latrines were built with no flush system, no drains, and no septic tanks. News of her interest spread like a bustee fire. The rest of the inhabitants milled round her quietly urging the comparative defects of their own sanitation. She found herself dragged from hut to hut. She squeezed down filthy runnels, stooped under four-foot doors, peered round gunny sacks which divided families in a room nine feet square. One hovel was so dark and filled with smoke that, in counting the family members, she mistook a pet monkey for a human child. In an undramatic voice the tenants listed the details of their chamber of horrors. Joan made notes.

Why should Joan have been roused to fury by the sight of Calcutta's sewage? The reason went back to her radical teens, when she had quarrelled with her missionary aunt about the British Empire. Her passion for the oppressed had become inextricably linked with her own fight against authority. Yet in a sense India had failed her. By the time she arrived imperial oppression was withdrawing rapidly into the shadows—so rapidly in fact as to make one wonder whether it had after all been quite so oppressive as she had liked to think. India had not resolved the clash of generations, nor had it given her roots. Why then had she stayed? Partly perhaps because she had learned to tilt at ignorance, poverty, disease, the great Abstracts, instead of against people

and systems. And her competence and energy had brought her a position of unexpected power, for sociologists were still a rare species in the sub-continent. The gipsy had turned temporary policeman. The free-lance rebel had become an ardent busybody—without prejudices or personal interests beyond her passion for tidying up the lives of others. Since most “new women” had given India a wide berth, India herself had helped to disguise the fact that the species was nearly obsolete elsewhere.

But the old cravings were not satisfied: they were merely obscured. Joan threw herself with excitement into each new project for the very reason that she still half-expected some wider vision to emerge as she fought her way through. This explained her open, experimental attitude and her unflagging zeal.

“Will you do something to help us, *Memsahib*?” They asked Joan in the *bustees* that day. And Joan replied, slashing uncertainty with slogans. “If I can’t, then I must find somebody who can.”

But who? She wrote a letter to the Public Health authorities. No reply. She wrote again. Still no reply. To the third she added the words: “Copies to Sir Fleetwood Raydon, Editor of the *NATION*; and to the Chancellor, Calcutta University.” The lie worked. She was visited by a very junior official from the Sanitary Department. Joan had her statistics ready. Calcutta was the fourth largest city in the world, she said, yet two million of its inhabitants lived without covered drains, nearly one million with no drains at all. Seventy per cent of the city’s dysentery was due to these facts. All of its cholera.

But what can the Corporation do? The young man had a face like a sad child and on his forefinger he wore a piece of pink glass set in a brass ring.

Do? Joan indignantly replied—The Corporation has power to constrain landlords to build underground sewage.

The young man twiddled his ring. True—but since

most of the Corporation are themselves landlords it is not customary for them to enforce these powers.

Then they must be shamed into doing so, Joan said. I shall open a monster petition. I shall organise the inhabitants of the *bustees* in bands willing to help with the digging. This will stir public opinion, provoke legislation, reduce costs. . . . She was entranced with her vision. She saw the streets shining like the glazed floor of a dairy. She heard every homestead echo to the lyrical flow of water closets.

The young man was carried away. Ah, Miss Raydon, he said. Miss Raydon you lover of India, you saviour of my country's poor. I shall do all I can to help you. My brothers will do all they can to help you. My family will do all *she* can to help you. You must, yes, please, you must, bless our humble abode with your honoured presence. Then, dramatically—let me enrol myself as your first volunteer—

She never saw the young man again. But three days later Nogen Dutt arrived, claiming to be his second cousin once removed. And from that moment the campaign was on.

Nogen was a cadaverous little man with cavernous eyes. He had sallow cheeks sloping so precipitously inwards from under his cheekbones that his face seemed to have them gnawed away by rats and then repaired by skin graft. With Nogen work was a sort of St. Vitus' dance. He never stopped to eat. Instead, while he worked, he nibbled water biscuits and drank stewy tea laced with ginger. Only a demon can rouse a Bengali to zeal.

Nogen drew up detailed sewage plans for each of the *bustees* in turn. Estimated costs. Directed the formation of labour units. Appeared evening after evening canvassing signatures for the mass petition. He carried his papers in a large, black midwifery bag with an improvised string handle.

It was hard to say when Joan began to feel towards

Nogen more than an impersonal, incurious astonishment. When he started to work in a new *bustee* without telling her, perhaps. Or later when she found a corps of volunteers digging an experimental length of drainage at his orders with mysteriously obtained piping. But she never had proof of his connection with the articles in the Communist press.

Then one afternoon in October Nogen said he had found a hut that would serve them admirably as H.Q. They could keep papers there. Anyone who wanted to see them would know where to come. If needed they might employ a porter.

A porter? Where would they find the money to pay a porter?

Oh, they need only supply him with "fooding." And Nogen nibbled a biscuit and returned to the job in hand.

They were sitting out at a table, the usual crowd squatting round them in silence. Women in mutton-coloured rags, with babies or earthenware on their hips, men with bandy legs and a couple of hundredweight gracefully poised on their heads, wire-haired children with red beads circling distended malarial bellies. There was no malice in the stare of the crowd and little curiosity. Just a passive observance of the unusual: destitution's only enjoyment.

Nogen had found that the go-ahead youth who had promised to form a squad of volunteer diggers had left for his village because of his wife's confinement. His father squatted in front, head leaned biblically against a knotted staff. "The truth is you don't deserve any drains: not one of you," Nogen crackled. He had the voice of a schoolboy about to break as a deep bass. St. Jerome continued to smile like a confidential adviser to the deity.

Joan prided herself on not being sentimental about the poor. Their one claim on her attention lay in the fact that misery was no fault of their own. Nogen's tendency to bark and bully and angrily crack his finger-joints

seemed to her an unnecessary waste of resources. This evening she said: "I don't blame them for going back to the village, Mr. Dutt. After all look at the conditions they have been given to live in here."

Nogen stared at her for an instant as if not understanding her intervention. "Then he returned to the subject of the H.Q. "No, moneys are no objection, Miss Raydon. I hope and believe some person or persons could have the will or the wherewithal to supply us."

When they reached the H.Q. the mystery deepened. It was a rickety building on stilts, about the size of a small signal box and entered by a fragile bamboo ladder. Round it was what Nogen described as a "garden"—the derelict site of another shack now carpeted with rotten coconut shells. To cross the coconuts they danced an old-fashioned shimmy. "You see," Nogen explained as he perched rashly on the ladder, "this keeps less important members of the public outside. You see this could be definitely perilous for more than one party at one time." Joan, cautiously testing one rung with one foot, saw. Then, as she waited for him to step off the ladder at the top, she saw something else. A notice pinned to the door. It took her a moment to puzzle out the Bengali characters. But at length she succeeded. The notice said: *Kammunist Arfish*.

Inside, the walls were covered with fly-blown posters proclaiming out-dated slogans, strips of which had been torn off to stuff gaps in the corrugated roof. Nogen was busy emptying his midwifery bag into a mango crate.

"What a disgraceful condition the office is in—" she began.

Nogen did not look up: "Exactly, exactly. But it will do us much great service—"

"But how can we use a Communist office, Mr. Dutt? It's quite out of the question—"

"Well, personally, I am without objections—"

"Well, personally, I'm not—" and she started to snatch his papers out of the crate.



He watched her in silence. There were two spots of darker colour on the sharp points of his cheeks. Then one by one he cracked the joints on his large bony fingers: "I could have plenty of other people to work with me here. Definitely. Plenty."

"I started this work, Mr. Dutt. You have no right to do this. No right at all."

Nogen's inevitable packet of biscuits was already open on the table and a column of white ants marching to invest it. He took one, blowing the ants away as he munched. He had huge hands with curved nails like Roman shields. "I give my professional services without cost or charges. I draw plans."

"I shall not allow this project to have anything to do with the Communists in any shape or form. I've told you that before."

"Our politicians are afraid of Communists. You mean to do good, Miss Raydon. Definitely you do. But you do not understand our politicians."

"This has nothing to do with understanding or not understanding. It is a question of principle—"

"I am not so interested in principles. Definitely not. Communists have money. Money buys tiger's milk. Corporation will not dare letting Communists take all credit. Corporation will be frightened. We can perhaps force them to help."

"That's not my way of doing things. If you persist in it, then I'm afraid we shall have to part company—"

It was meant to sound menacing, but it didn't. Nogen, who was a good six inches shorter than she was, looked at her and continued to munch. "Then you will render me back my papers."

"I shall copy them first."

"They are my possessions. I ask for them back."

"They are our joint property. You can have them later—"

Muttering the classic insult about the English no longer being in control of the country, Nogen moved

threateningly round the table. Joan turned to the door.

Outside, the bamboo ladder, disturbed by their climb, had come unhitched. Joar jumped without hesitating on to the carpet of coconuts. Then, picking herself up, she slithered quickly across to the road.

## 2

At half-past seven on that October evening Joan walked up Sen Street. It was cool now. Flags of mist had unfurled with the dusk. Those who could afford them threw light woollen scarves across their shoulders. Sen Street was empty. The two fat men had retired indoors leaving broken, cane-bottomed chairs to face each other across the narrow gulf.

After the terror of summer and the wild explosion of rain, fresh cool air breeds fabulous dreams of achievement. The purple hyacinth runs riot along water-logged dykes. Malaria mosquitoes breed beneath their heavy lid of leaf.

She had joined battle. She would make an exact copy of all the material which Nogen had compiled. Then she would campaign for her own volunteers. Threaten the Corporation with a dire drift to Communism unless they listened.

## 3

Asha was at the hostel gate swathed up to the ears in a white shawl, her eyes in full orbit. "There are two kids come, *Jo-Di*. With their mother. The reporter-torter's brought them—"

"You mean Krishna *Babu*?"

"Mother Durga what beautiful kids!" Asha's bright eyes darted from side to side. Who would have thought that she could be so sentimental about children?

Krishna came towards her through the cloister. He was wearing a *choti* of transparent muslin, but not holding it affectedly between fingers as the smart Bengali should. Instead the *choti* was bunched in the wrong places and

its hem trailed disconsolate on the ground. There was the usual bulge of *betel* nut in his cheek. As he walked his gaze circled above her head as if searching for bats in the ceiling. He practically stumbled on top of her before he stopped. "Aha! So here you are," and an expression of delighted astonishment spread over his face. "We expected you earlier." He appeared to have no inkling of the fact that, since it was *her* house, *his* was the presence which needed to be explained.

He merely said: "I want you to meet Nilima Devi."  
"Nilima Devi?"

For answer Krishna waved an airy hand at some of the girls who were clustered in the cloister on straw mats. "Chitra's been playing to us on the portable harmonium. The man who first sold us that thing did more damage than the whole of the East India Company—" Chitra caressed the offending instrument, her owl-face at once grave and humorous. While he had been waiting, Krishna it seemed had had time to draw the whole hostel into his eccentric orbit.

In Joan's office a woman sat on the window-sill leaning her head against the bars as she stared into the darkening street.

"Joan, I want you to meet Kolyani. My cousin-sister Kolyani. Famous from now on under the *nom de plume* of Nilima Devi."

Kolyani turned. She had a fixed, wistful look in her eyes and a crimson marriage mark the size of a florin between thick brows. For an instant she looked scarcely more than a girl. But when she lifted her hands in greeting, the *sari* fell back off her head, showing hair that was already silver. Her arms and forehead were loaded with jewellery like a dancer's.

"Then you have made up your mind to go?" Joan asked.

"*Dada*—" she referred to Krishna as Elder Brother—" *Dada* has made it up for me." And she gave a gentle, melancholy smile.

Krishna was standing with an arm round his cousin's shoulder. "I hope you approve, Joan."

Joan took Kolyani's limp hands: "Oh, my dears, I do. I can't tell you how much I approve."

"But it's terrible what he makes me do. My husband thinks I go to the country to spend the holidays at home—"

"Where is he?"

"Asleep at my flat in a nest of gin bottles."

"No—*Dada*, he mustn't. Not gin. Not more than one."

"Arjun has them under lock and key."

"But Arjun doesn't understand. The bottles must be half emptied first, then filled with water. Then the caps replaced as if they were new."

"Arjun will be instructed—"

"We ought to do it now, *Dada*. We ought to go to him."

"Your train leaves in three hours."

"I am not going to take it." Kolyani drew the veil of her *sari* half-way up her face like a timid bride. It made her English, which at best had the thin twittering sound of a bird imitating speech, hard to follow.

Joan said briskly: "Oughtn't you to be getting some sleep? Where are the children?"

"With Asha, I believe."

"So *that's* why supper isn't ready yet. Dear Krishna, you certainly *have* made your presence felt."

Asha resisted. She shared the common belief that children went to sleep when they dropped from sheer exhaustion and not before. "Goodness, they're not tired, Jo-Di. They are as bright as fireflies."

Krishna lectured, making exaggerated amends for the disruption caused by the family. They should have been asleep hours ago. Who said they could run riot in the kitchen? Didn't they realise that important work was being delayed because of their naughtiness? The whole city might be reduced to a standstill just because of them.

Then he put his arm round the three-year-old boy, who was solemn and stout in shorts. "This is my favourite

nephew, Joan. But as for that monster over there—what shall we do? Shall we call Delhi police on the long distance so as to warn them she's coming?" And he picked up the telephone and lunged with it in mock ferocity at his niece. Odd to see Krishna's usually calm figure suddenly contorted, dank hair falling over his forehead, thin fists theatrically waved in the air. His niece buried her head in her mother's lap, giggling with terror and delight.

"I don't want to go to Delhi," the boy announced gravely to the world in general.

"He says he won't like Delhi because there are trams there, he says he doesn't like trams because of the one that knocked down his daddy." Asha's breathless interest in the children had blurred the edge of her normally rasping voice.

"Asha—*please*. Supper is nearly an hour late."

Kolyani made a dive for the boy gathering him up from his uncle's side. "There, there my child. You won't have to go. We'll none of us go. We'll stay at home after all."

Krishna seemed not to hear. In the silence that followed he lit a cigarette and sat down on the desk, knocking some of Joan's papers on to the floor. As she stooped to pick them up, he continued to smoke, head lifted, on his face a detached and secret smile as if in delighted surprise at having landed on the wrong planet. Then he clambered off the desk and waddled over to his cousin: "Joan, be a good girl. Hand me my brief case. That's right. I must give Kolyani the luggage tickets, mustn't I? Or they may get left behind."

"But the luggage?"

Krishna tapped the side of his nose: "I sent it advance this morning. Here are the rail tickets, too. But—what do you think Joan?—best not give those yet. Had we, eh? I think, *Khuki*, you can't be trusted with them. We must get you safely on to the train first."

Kolyani joined the palms of her hands imploringly

together: "Oh, Miss Raydon, do you really think I am doing right?"

"My dear, I do. I think it's magnificent. And as for Krishna—I wouldn't have believed he was capable of such efficiency."

Krishna grunted and then snook a thin delighted forefinger half an inch from his nose.

Joan met her experiences four square, filing, labelling, sorting, numbering with ceaseless and unconscious competence as she went along. With people she was as expert as a cash register. In went the coins, ping went the bell, and up went the numbers. How much help could they be expected to give in the battle with war, want, and waste? That was the perennial question. And the answers, usually remarkably accurate, were printed in neat red letters on the balance sheet. Krishna, however, put the machine out of action. The bell did not ring and the register stuck. The coins had to be taken out and inspected, one by one, to see why they didn't fit.

When she first came to India he had shown the same fever of organisation that she saw again this evening. She remembered him making ten telephone calls trying to trace luggage missing from the boat at Bombay while she, hiding her impatience, repeatedly assured him that every possible step had already been taken. Then there were villas—at the sea, in the Himalayas, on deserted lakes—conjured out of his friends for her use, cars mysteriously obtained to waft her on important visits, interviews miraculously wheedled from the Great . . . It was all very charming, of course. Yet at the same time it had struck her as distinctly odd. She couldn't rid herself of the idea that he was putting on an act. As if, accidentally finding himself responsible for her visit, he must live up an exaggerated idea of what he imagined a European expected such responsibility to involve. She had refused to exploit his attention. It had ceased. This had confirmed her diagnosis.

But this evening she wondered. She saw again a hint

of that old improbable passion for activity. And this time she was no longer the victim. She had been promoted accomplice.

#### 4.

A bed had been made up in one of the cloister cubicles. But Kolyani preferred the floor. The children were sprawled over her lap, asleep. Krishna sat smoking on the bed. Between them the street threw a pool of discoloured light.

"So that is your famous Miss Joan."

Krishna gave a humorous grunt.

Kolyani sighed: "The Goddess of Energy. Your Western Goddess—" Pause. "Have you ever said anything to her, Dada?"

"Said anything? Said what?"

"You know what I mean."

Krishna thought for a moment, then settled himself slowly, comfortably on to the bed: "Why was it that the peacock never spoke to the Goddess Saraswati?" At this point, he choked, spilling cigarette ash on the pillow. Then he lapsed into silence.

"Why, Dada?"

"The Peacock dared not risk the scorn of the Goddess. So he became her bearer instead. He offered to act as her mount whenever she went on her travels. That's why Saraswati rides on a peacock to this day. . . ."

A further pause—then "Oh, Dada, I do wish you could marry."

"It would never work, Khuki. You remember at the end of *A Passage to India* how the landscape gets in the way? Malignant fate forcing Indian and Englishman apart? I wouldn't explain it as fate. Rather as character. Kipling was right. East and West have cast the two of us into moulds that can never fit. I didn't believe that once—but I do now."

"I wasn't meaning that, Dada. I was thinking of one

of our own girls. Someone who understands your true self."

"Aha, but then have I got a 'true self'? Until I know that—how can I be sure that there's anything that needs to be understood?"

"But, *Dada*—you need looking after!"

At this Krishna swung himself abruptly off the bed: "No I don't. I need *gārding* with red-hot irons—that's what I need."

Krishna stood up in the half-light and closed his eyes. The subject apparently had lost its interest.

The cloisters outside were empty. A little desultory chatter came from one of the upper rooms. Otherwise the hostel had sunk into an early silence. But the city beyond was still in full cry. Trams clattered. Cinema loud-speakers spluttered and wailed, a banana-seller advertised his fruit like a prophet threatening death and damnation to the wicked. Down Sen Street someone was playing a bamboo flute. Tra-la-la-la-tra. Three times running it swerved up, quivered on the top note, then sped unerringly down the scale, scattering half and quarter tones in its wake. It was a flight of birds, fountains, leaves—a hint of death in the midst of sudden laughter. All these sounds together made up the sound of the city. And not the sound of the city alone, but the sound of India, of a whole people. The perpetual lament of those born too close to the stars.

Krishna stumped slowly up and down the cloister on cylindrical, unathletic legs. Then he stopped for an instant to listen. Carefully, he rolled a *betel* nut from out of his battered packet. Leaned his head against a pillar. Stared up the silent shaft of the hostel courtyard, up, far up, into the night beyond. Thought—who but saints dare gaze into the face of silence?

From Joan's office on the far side came the rapid rattle of a typewriter—

"Oy, Kolyani, oy, *Khuki*—"



"Yes?"

"Aren't you asleep?"

"Of course not."

"I'm going to tell you how we met."

"Who?"

"Joan and I."

"In Egypt wasn't it?"

"Yes, but it's the circumstances that I'm going to tell you about—"

"On a beach somewhere—I remember you telling me that—"

"Alexandria. That September after the war when passages still had to be wangled. Do you remember how I did a series for the *NATION* on the culture of the Middle East? I was lying in the sun wondering what could be more pleasant than to be changed into a grain of Alexandrian sand for all eternity.

"Some girls came. Their voices darted all round me like birds. *Apsaras* perhaps. Celestial dancing maids. I didn't open my eyes. I was waiting for them to press me down lightly, lightly into the sand. The intersection of the timeless with time. . . . Their tennis ball caught me a sharp blow on the nose. My spectacles fell off. I started to tumble for them on the beach. One of the *Apsaras* came up, apologising in French. I said I didn't understand French. The *Apsara* was dressed in a cotton frock. The others had bikini suits joined by two strings—for Alexandria was very strict about bathing costumes being in one piece. Suddenly they weren't *Apsaras* any more, but Levantine giantesses leaning against the sun. Then there was another shock and they'd turned into student social workers out on the spree. Their leader—the cotton one—not even Levantine; but a young English miss from the Ministry of Information who did social work in her spare time. Each of us had thought the other to be Egyptian—

"When she learned that I was an Indian journalist she told me about her uncle. Imagine this happening to me

—when I loathe coincidences. Dreary, mechanical things. I suppose that's why I didn't admit Sir Fleetwood to be my editor.

"When they left, I found my spectacles. Broken clean in half. They weren't mended till three days later and meantime I was practically blind.

"Joan had asked to see me again. It was about her uncle she wanted to talk. She'd realised at once that I must know him. Not intuition as I thought. Merely a pretty shrewd guess at his eminence in the world of Indian journalism. She'd thought I'd said nothing out of disapproval or dislike. That I hadn't wanted to hurt her feelings. But she'd no feelings in the matter, she said. She'd never met her uncle and she wanted me to tell her honestly all that I could. . . . Would they get on well? She was a socialist, an anti-imperialist, an everything-you-can-imagine. Was he one of the old school? What did he think of Indian Independence? Did he mind that I'd been in prison for supporting the Congress?

"She wanted to do something useful. Her job in Egypt would soon be over. No doubt she could get plenty of work back home. But she didn't want to go back. She'd been brought up by her mother's aunts. One had been a missionary—the type that thought Gandhi took drugs—while the other, whom she had been quite fond of, was dead. Besides she had never really been part of her mother's world. Her father's family was Jewish. Her mother's family had never approved of the marriage and they had had their own way of making her feel, even during childhood, that she didn't quite belong. She had some money of her own and was lucky enough to be able to choose in which corner of the world she would settle.

"Perhaps in India there might be an opening? She had a passion for method, for punctuality—all the ghastly virtues she called them. She had a First in Sociology from the London School of Economics and practical experience in several countries since the start of the war. Perhaps

India could use somebody like her? Somebody who didn't want to preach, to convert, to rule—merely to work?

"I don't know what it was that got me. Of course I couldn't see more than two inches in front of my nose. Perhaps that's why I talked too much. I told her all about India and why I thought she could help us. Everything seemed suddenly clear. The marriage of Western rationalism and Eastern intuition: of analytical energy and quiet acceptance of the Absolute: the agony of the Cross and the serene indolence of the lotus throne. The barbaric pride of the West made humble—Eastern incompetence and sloth gradually transformed. It's such an old dream. Tagore had it. Vivokananda had it. And now there was I having it once again for all it was worth. This time by moonlight on an Egyptian beach. India could make the dream a reality I said. And this was the moment for us to try. But we needed the right kind of Westerner to help us. So you see, Miss Raydon, that's why you must come.

"Yes, that really was the sort of thing I said.

"She didn't accept half of it, of course. She's never taken me very seriously. She'd been reading some sort of book about Indian mysticism and hadn't liked it. 'You Hindus may have invented the concept of Zero,' she said, 'but I'm afraid I shall always prefer the Greeks who did a good deal more without it.' It was this that fascinated me. Why should someone who knew so well the sort of impression that India was likely to make on her be so keen to come? Were we really as incompatible as we seemed?

"Could she escape the usual fate of European women out East? Hard and dry and dull as nails like the *Burra Memsahibs*—soft and silly and theosophical like her own uncle's wife—

"Perhaps we'd be too much for her. . . . She'd spread her compassion thinner and thinner till India sucked out her soul and blew it back in her face. Or—worse

—she'd fight us. Challenge 4,000 years of culture and end bitter, angry, defeated. It was about the only time—then—that I'd ever tried to influence anyone. I got panicky. The risk seemed immense. I tried to warn her off. And this, of course, was probably the one thing that clinched her decision. I ought to have known that she liked things to be made difficult. I left a week later with a letter to Sir Fleetwood. She had never written to him before. I was to be the missing link—"

Kolyani waited. It was always so hard to tell whether Krishna had finished: to know which of the disconnected fragments or sudden silences was meant to be final.

"Dada," she said at last, timidly. "Dada—I'm sorry, Dear Dada really I am sorry—"

This roused him to one of his leaps into action. "Accha, Khuki—we must plan your day in Delhi. Will you write your articles before breakfast? Maya can go to the Bengali school of course—or—no perhaps that mightn't be too safe—"

"You see, Dada, I'm sorry for many things—" Kolyani persisted. "Sorry most of all for my attitude—and, oh, sorry for so much else—"

Krishna lit a fresh cigarette: "Your first article is to be ready by next Friday," he said, abstractedly picking a shred of tobacco off his lips as he stared out of the window. "I've asked Bhupen to send a file so that you can see the sort of stuff the paper expects—"

An English voice was heard coming across the courtyard. "Krishna—where are you? My good man—I hope you realise that your sister has barely half an hour to catch her train—"

Krishna held up his hand imperiously. "Come on, Khuki. Wake up those children." He spoke as if it was everyone's fault but his own that they were late.

On her desk, after they had gone, Joan found a cheque. "The first week's wages. Let me know if Sir Fleetwood expects payment to be continued."

How had he managed to walk in and deposit it there without her knowing? Why not talk to her about it? Fruitless, of course, to ask. Krishna would only look puzzled and, after a long pause, ask if she still found flannel next the skin an effective antidote for dysentery.

## Four

A FEW WEEKS later it was the Bengali month of *Aswin*. *Aswin* runs from mid-October to mid-November and spans the Festival holiday. Rain, flowers, flies, and goat's meat marked the annual crisis of rejoicing. Myriads of insects latched at the end of the monsoon ended their nuptial flight in the flames of votive lamps. The various Mother Goddesses were enthroned for no more than three days; then launched tenderly from river banks in the general direction of the Ganges. Little clusters of women and children watched tearfully as their crowned heads bobbed from sight. Here and there a limp, dejected hand was raised in farewell. Some austere, cosmic physician had condemned their household pets to be put away and they accepted the decree with resignation. At the dark end of the month the Festival of Kali, the dark Goddess, was still to come. Kali the greatest of them all.

The students, of course, were on holiday. Only Asha and Joan stayed on at the hostel. Asha suffered an influx of cousin brothers-in-law, cousin aunts, and just plain cousins up from Midnapore to sponge. She received no salary as Hostel "house-mother" beyond "fooding" and shelter and Joan knew, in spite of the "untidiness" of it that to object to this sudden eruption would destroy the family spirit in which Asha did her work.

In the midst of relatives Asha discarded stridency and attempted the monumental resignation of a Hindu widow.

There were no peremptory invitations to share her evening toilet now. Only an occasional glance, quickened with the secrets of another world.

For Joan the holidays were an excuse to work. In fits and starts over the course of the years, Krishna had tried to interest her in the mysteries of the Hindu Pantheon. Explained how the images had only symbolic value as personifications of the Divine and how, once their worship was completed, they lost their potency, being thrown out on the waters, whatever their æsthetic quality might be. But Joan found it hard to take seriously the elaborate convolutions of Hindu mysticism. While her neighbours over-ate themselves she copied Nogen's lists of volunteers and, as far as she was able, his sketch plans for underground sewage. She made a first approach to the Public Health Department of the Corporation in order to discuss her plans and was told that, until after the holidays, interviews would only be granted on the subjects of cholera and the pensions of Pest Controllers. She wrote a cautious article for the press, in which she asked for offers of voluntary help in organising the project.

She received them. Rashly the article had carried her full address, so that an exotic cross-section of the lunatic fringe descended on Sen Street bearing gifts. Few of the callers were interested in her sewage; most had some obsessive idea to which they were dedicated—religious, medical, sartorial, or hygienic—and sensed from Joan's article the possibility of a European audience. It is the tolerance of India, the refusal to show people the door when they become boring or difficult, which encourages such a bland and riotous growth of eccentrics.

The last of the fringers was an enormously fat man in homespun shirt, trousers, and Gandhi cap. He trapped Joan in her office one evening by standing four round in the doorway. He was starting a new movement, he said. Miss Raydon should unite with it. Then together they could lift the Motherland out of misery and bring

in the age of Rama. What was his movement? Why—nothing less than this: Every Indian should make his own soap. To use factory soap was to wash oneself in the blood of India's starving millions. Did Miss Raydon realise that factory soap was made with coconut oils and that the plantations of coconuts had brought famine to areas once rich in rice? He produced a bar of earth soap from his capacious shirt-tail. It had a catlike smell. From the same unlikely storage place he produced a small brass plate, a box of home-made matches and a pattern for the new Ram Raja trousers especially designed by himself to economise on cloth. A pair to this design was, that very moment, concealing his own limbs. How did they strike her? Here he gazed coyly round at his vast expanse of buttock. Then he dived once more into his pocket and produced a notice misprinted on hand-made cardboard which bore the legend: *Naresb Guha. Friend of the Poor—Organising Founder-President. Service of Rama Society.* If India followed his principles, he said, as he pushed this dog-eared card over the table, she would become a hive of home-industry, democracy, and cultural work.

Unable to stem the verbal flood, Joan had picked up an envelope that had arrived on the evening post and was pretending an urgent interest.

Thank heavens I don't find these lunatics irritating. I suppose the conviction that they all ought to be behind barbed wire is about balanced by the feeling that the *Burra sahibs* would probably like to put me there, too. The result is a sort of armed neutrality. I'm not involved. Feel no temptation to prick old pot-belly in the paunch—nor even to be mildly cutting and rude. That means I could soon have him eating out of my hand. Even digging latrines if I wanted it. But no, with that figure, perhaps better not.

"How kind of you to come along, Mr. Guha. Really so kind. May I get in touch with you when I think we can be of use to each other? Just now I'm afraid I'm really

dreadfully busy," and, as she spread the contents of the envelope out on the desk in front of her, she flashed him a brilliant smile. Her regular teeth and broad mouth were such a help on these occasions. Her smile always looked sincere.

The Organising Founder-President at last withdrew, intoning ecstatically: "Miss Raydon I salute you most admirably for your great endeavours on behalf of the Motherland and I propose you as Vice-President of Our Society—"

There were three newspaper cuttings. "Bengali Ways Of Cooking Fish," by Nilima Devi (in two parts), and "The Boy Who Was Afraid Of Trams," by Auntie. Kolyani's first fruits. There was a cheque but no accompanying letter. The envelope looked as though it had been addressed by a mathematical spider. Krishna's handwriting was characteristic. Joan dropped the articles into the waste paper basket without reading them.

It was good not to have to worry about the Robbi situation further.

## 2.

It was 8.15 next morning when Robbi appeared for the first time. Asha was ladling out Red Cross milk in the yard—for that still continued in spite of the holidays—and Joan was eating puffed rice and dry molasses in the belief that this astringent mixture cleaned the liver.

"Hullo," he said, "I've come to see my wife," and he lurched clumsily through the office door.

"Your wife? I'm afraid all our girls are unmarried, besides they're on holiday—" But she noticed that his unwashed smell had a flavour of something sweetish, something remarkably like alcohol, and she understood. That's why she added with such conviction: "I'm afraid I know absolutely nothing about your wife."

Robbi was heavily built and his face was pouchy and puffed like a malarial baby's. The effect when he winked



at her she found distinctly odd: "Now listen, Miss Raydon—why need to act Outraged Missionary?"

Hard to be impressive through a mouthful of puffed rice—but Joan did her best: "I must repeat that you are completely mistaken—"

For answer Robbi merely looked at her, yawned, then ambled out of the room. She heard him being sick at the far end of the cloister. A moment later he was back again, the shade of his face having lightened from dish-cloth to tea-towel.

"I don't know who you are," Joan said. "But wouldn't it be better if you went home?"

"I'm Rabindranath Das Gupta and Robbi says how can he go home when you've taken his home away from him?"

"But I don't know you, Mr. Das Gupta—so how can I—"

Robbi joined his palms together with an expression of craft and humility. "But I hear you may be knowing my cousin-brother-in-law, isn't it? Krishna Gopal Bannerjee—art critic, dabbler, mystic, and God knows bloody what—"

Joan tried the Home-Nursing technique—bland, competent, straightforward. "As you seem so unwell perhaps you ought to have a bit of a rest. You can go home later."

It worked. It worked too well in fact. Robbi gave a curt nod then ambled off up the cloister and stretched himself out full-length on the floor. Sleep hit him like a pole-axe. Would anyone but an undertaker ever shift him again?

Joan tried to contact Krishna while Robbi was out of the way. But Krishna was not in town. He had gone south for a conference. So she raided his flat and returned, in triumph with his servant.

"I've brought Arjun to help take you home."

Robbi shot up from sleep as rapidly as he had plunged into it. "Not until I find my wife."

"Arjun says that your wife is on holiday at her parents'."

"If she had gone to her parents why is she taking bedding rolls? It is only one bus journey from Calcutta, isn't it? You all think drinkard doesn't notice things. But I'm not such bloody great-drinkard that I don't notice my own wife's bedding roll."

"Well, wherever your wife is, Mr. Das Gupta, I repeat that IT'S NOTHING TO DO WITH ME—"

"Oh, isn't it?" In his anger, as in everything else, Robbi was like a blurred enlargement. He pressed in on her, breathing within inches of her forehead, scraping her cheek with something that he had fished out of his crumpled shirt. "Then how do you explain these? Three counterfoils all made in name of 'Joan.' First one the very day that my wife disappears. 120 rupees a week. As regular as pay cheque."

"You have no right to steal your brother-in-law's cheque book—" the offensive was the only thing that she dared take—"Give it to me."

Robbi was surprisingly humbled: "All right. You may forge better than I can, I suppose. I'm no bloody miracle at it. Not with a hand that's got the shakes," and he held up his wrist, watching the fingers tremble.

"And now perhaps you will go home with Arjun."

He turned on her once more disordered and menacing: "Not unless and until you explain that money."

"My good man, I have no intention whatever of disclosing private transactions with your brother-in-law. And if you'll excuse me, I'll get on with my work."

With this she drove past him, head magnificently lifted on neck, mole quivering at the tip of her chin, athletic legs flexing to her fierce stride. The vision deflated him. With another startling change of mood, Robbi whimpered after her down the cloister.

"You wouldn't be so hard on me, Miss Joan. Not if you understand. I can't help being born with artist's hands, artist's eyes, artist's feelings. Gods and men and birds and flowers. Once, I make them dancing in one unbroken rhythm of happiness. Last great folk artist of India. Even

old goat Krishna was calling me that. But you can't be folk artist when folk is dead, can you, Miss Joan? If you would be here in riots or famine you'd understand. The folk lying about in streets and swelling like bladders as they putrefy. How can artist live in such horror? How can he work when it stinks like a mortuary down every street?

"We copy your civilisation, you see. But we don't understand it. We pull your nice new machinery to pieces and leave the bits out in the fields to rot. We learn democracy and forget all our undemocratic practices about feeding. Yes, Miss Joan, we turn India into a sewage farm. Not one nice hygienic English sewage farm where children can be sailing model yachts, but a stinking, crawling, gaping pit of horror—"

Joan had reached the kitchen annex at the end of the cloister, with Robbi trailing raggedly behind her. She climbed the steps to fill a brass pot with water so as to be able to start preparing supper. Robbi was the first drunkard she had ever met in India and the first case of D.T.s she had met anywhere. She thought: instead of insects, he imagines this cosmic horror all round him. How typical that it should take Indians like that. She had prim, pursed lips. Getting-on-with-the-job-in-spite-of-difficulties. Her harassed schoolmistress look.

"Yes, take fooding, Miss Joan. We still eat our meals squatting on the kitchen floor! Isn't it? But you've taught us that it's civilised to eat with our boots on. So today we trample filth all over our table-cloth." He looked down—"You see—isn't that just what I say?—even you, Miss Joan, come into kitchen with sandals—"

Seeing his scruffy, scurfy head bowed beneath her she had an idea. Why not give him a small shock? Pour a dribble of water out of the brass pot? It was partly a reaction against playing the schoolmistress. Partly too that she'd heard that water was useful in cases of hysteria.

Unfortunately the dribble turned into cascade. At the first feel of it Robbi jerked abruptly upwards and knocked

the pot out of Joan's hands. The whole pint poured across his face.

"For an extraordinary moment she was not sure whether he was going to attack her in fury or faint out of sheer surprise. His underlip was trembling. He breathed fast. His hair waved like seaweed over his forehead.

Then slowly he sank to his knees, hands clasped in prayer—a peasant in front of a miracle-working image.

"Ah, Miss Joan, you understand me. Only you understand me."

Ten minutes later, his head bound with a towel, Robbi left the hostel with Arjun. He was in a mood of great hilarity, shouting snatches of poetry at the passers-by.

### 3.

Lady Raydon had discovered her husband's hostility to his niece and now she had added Joan to her list of causes. She tried to persuade her to spend the latter part of the holidays in the Himalayas. She had heard of a *Rishi* claimed by his disciples to be 3,351 years old whom it might be salutary for them to visit . . . Joan declined, giving as her excuse some of the salient facts about her sewage. Her aunt responded with passionate sympathy.

A few days later Lady Raydon was on the 'phone again. She had just met a leading American Quakeress visiting India on the look-out for "key-points of growth in Asia" to which her committee might make grants. She had convinced Ella Parkinson that Joan's drains were a key point of unusually strong growth. When could she bring her on a tour of inspection? In her imagination Joan was already busily spending the grant. Nogen might be weaned away from the Communists: publicity, organisation, surveying—all these could be put on a proper footing. It was her quick gift at picturing work completed which gave Joan driving power.

Her aunt meanwhile was spraying suggestions out of the receiver. "Now, dear, we must have things looking

really nice. I won't have you ruining chances through any Puritan scruples. Yes, yes, dee-ar, I *know* Ella is a Quaker. But she's American, too. And Americans do go by looks. Your Uncle says it's the influence of what he calls the 'glossies.' Now as I see it, dee-ar, sewage isn't terribly romantic. Not to look at I mean. And I do believe that if Ella can write back and somehow leave the impression that your drafts flow through a background that is both colourful and picturesque it might make a real difference to her committee. And as I see it that background can be provided by your hostel. Now—what about the milk distribution? Is that still going on? Good. Then why not have it just a few hours later? So that it coincides with her visit, I mean. Indian children have such exquisite teeth and manners . . . Then there are your girls. It really is a pity that they are all away. Mightn't just a few selected ones be asked to look in? After all I am sure they ought to be doing study during their vac. —I'm certain girls used to at Oxford. Besides, well-bred Indian girls can be so very attractive—”

Joan said a firm “no” to both these suggestions but her Aunt was not easily deflected. Chitra, the hostel's senior student, came from one of the best Calcutta families and lived near Chowringhee. Lady Raydon knew the family and telephoned Chitra. She arranged for her to bring three or four of the others to the hostel on the morning of Miss Parkinson's visit and to greet the visitor with the National Song. Afterwards they were to scatter round the cloister looking as studious and decorative as possible.

Joan was half furious and three-quarters amused at her Aunt's triumphant strategy. But she decided to let the arrangement stand. After all she had her own principles to which she was fanatically dedicated. Half-an-hour before the visit, for instance, she sallied out with pan and shovel and an air of dedicated protestantism to deal with a dead cat. It had been lying three yards from the hostel gate for nearly a week. Its condition was grisly.

On the corner of Sen Street a barber was shaving a Brahmin's arm-pits. Both he and his client were so fascinated by the sight of a *me'n'sahib* turned sweeper that they stared open-mouthed, the Brahmin's bare arm still lifted motionless above his head.

The cat was half buried when Robbi appeared. He was groping his way unsteadily along College Street railings. Two little boys flattered round him like carrier-pigeons, advertising his progress to the passers-by.

Robbi's *dhoti* was stained and torn. He had lost his sandals. Hafr fell over bloodshot eyes in a tousled fringe. His heavy face was the colour of dough kneaded by dirty hands.

When he saw Joan he wrapped his dirty muslin round him. "It's my daughter," he moaned. "She's dying."

With electrical efficiency the usual Calcutta crowd collected. The Brahmin, bringing his arm down, gave up all pretence of a shave. A rickshaw coolie, turning to stare open-mouthed, missed the traffic lights and a long queue of vehicles, equally absorbed, halted behind him. Aware of his audience, Robbi was in full voice. Their eldest and dearest was dying. Without her mother she had lost the will to live. Doctors could do nothing for her. The robbers who had stolen his wife were now murdering his daughter as well. They had brought ruin on a happy and tranquil home.

Inside the hostel he was less coherent. He wept. He bubbled a beery spume from his lips. He lay at full length on the cloister floor banging his head against the concrete.

It was nearly 10.30. Punctuality was a Western vice to which Quakeresses were certain to be addicted. But, thank Heavens, by the time the visitors arrived Robbi was emitting nothing more alarming than an occasional whimper: and this from behind the locked doors of Joan's office.

The Quakeress was well-kept. She had travelled 15,000 miles since September 3rd and showed not a trace of it.

Her two wavy plumes of grey hair were pinioned with black ribbon. She made notes, friends, and intelligent comments in a grave and ceaseless stream. When she spoke one was aware of the Hugo Fund of American Goodwill circling her like an invisible presence. The girls greeted her in the courtyard: arms folded, chins up, eyes merry.

In the autumn light the National Anthem sounded like a brisk salutation to the sun.

Joan, nervously alert to the subdued whimpers coming from her office, waited for the song to finish. Now—now at last they could move. . . . But she was foiled. Chitra advanced with a jasmine garland the size of a feather boa. The Quakeress accepted it stoically, refusing to admit that she was troubled by small inserts or cloying scent. No, on the contrary, she had lifted a determined chin above the tide of blossom, and, horror of horrors, she was about to make a speech. "Well, girls, I guess that's one thing that most certainly does speak the same language all over the world. Flowers. Say it with flowers and all five continents will be sure to understand you. And I must say you certainly do have a wonderful way—" (twitch: an insect poked its proboscis into the nape of her neck) "—a wonderful way of saying it, with flowers—" (twitch: a drop of water hopped with lascivious ease down the rungs of her spinal column) "—in your wonderful country. Now back home in North Carolina where I come from—"

It was at this point that Joan's luck turned. Robbi loosed a volley of bestial howls.

Lady Raydon gripped her niece's arm: "Joan—what on earth's that?"

"Oh, it's just someone who's gone mad on us."

"My dear, it sounds perfectly awful. Oughtn't you to get the police?"

But Robbi, glaring through the grille window like a caged beast had become alarmingly coherent. "Ana, so you have help from bloody Americans. But wives can

be put into prison for deserting their husbands, whatever bloody Americans say. Murder's a bloody crime, too, and all those who have helped my wife escape are murdering my daughter—"

Most of this—especially the bloodier bits—was in English. The students drew into a graceful huddle like antelopes scenting danger. Joan scrambled her guests up the stairs. "I'm most terribly sorry. When he is drunk he gets this persecution mania. It's all mixed up with grandiose ideas about the decay of civilisation. That's where America comes in. He used to be rather brilliant—"

"My, my! You certainly do have a whole lot of challenging problems."

"Yes, doesn't she? I always say in Sen Street you never know what to expect." Lady Raydon, always the soul of tactfulness, attempted a diversion. "Joan's family—just like mine—have had such a long connection with India, haven't they dee-ar? Her grandfather was a civil servant and one of her aunt's a missionary. I always think what a perfect ending it is to the long chapter of Anglo-Indian history. Joan staying on as India's friend and servant once the old masters have left. 'And the last shall be first and the first last'."

Joan launched into an explanation, of her scheme, maps, estimates, reports, registers spread out on the common room table. Just as they were under way there was a knock at the door. It was Asha. The police were here. The police? But what did they want? Asha didn't know. Someone had rung for them. They wanted to see "Miss Joan."

"Someone had rung for them"—Oh, goodness, of course. When Robbi had been imprisoned in the office she had forgotten to switch off the telephone.

"All right. I'll be down in a minute."

But a minute was too late. Two policemen were already edging in at the door. The sergeant was burly with pop-eyes, khaki puttees and turban. He shouldered his lathi-stick as if presenting arms and announced: "You detain



one gentleman, *memsahib*. We come to give her release. We arrive."

Joan explained briefly, in Bengali, what had happened. The Sergeant listened. He had pushed one end of his large moustache into his mouth and was chewing it like an intelligent tortoise eating grass. When she had finished, he merely repeated his previous statement, this time adding a dark accusation of murder at the end.

Oh, bother . . . he didn't speak Bengali. She ought to have known from his waxed moustache and bulging cheekbones that he came from Bihar. Joan tried again this time in very inadequate Hindi. But the Sergeant was uncompromising. Having been picked for the job of enforcing the law on a *memsahib* because of his boasted facility in English, he was determined not to hide his light. "*Memsahib*, you descend down stairway with us, please. Now you come descend, please. With us."

Joan switched her attack onto his subordinate. "What is that man doing with my papers?"

Very slowly and carefully the lance-corporal had picked up the documents, maps, estimates, reports, and registers, turned each of them over so as to scrutinise them on both sides and then put them under his arm.

"He is collecting evidences," the Sergeant explained portentously.

Joan turned to her aunt: "I'm so sorry. Of course this is all quite monstrous. But if you'll excuse me I'll just go down and telephone the police headquarters—I suppose it's not these poor idiots' fault—"

Miss Parkinson rose: "Now, look, dear, don't you bother your head about us. As you're so very busy—"

"Oh, but this won't take a moment."

"Yes, but anyway, dear, I did ought to be moving on to my other appointments."

"Then I must bring you again, Ella. Some day when you and Joan can both spread yourselves."

"Gee—I do wish I could do that, Lady Raydon. But I guess I'm one of these shameless American globe trotters.

Why—I only have another 72 hours right here in Calcutta ! Isn't that terrible ? I guess I find the East so very fascinating that my committee are frightened I'd stay put right where I was if they allowed me one moment longer than that." She took Joan's hands. "Now listen, dear, don't you go doing too much. A lot of your work is *very, very* valuable."

Her heart heavy with premonition Joan noticed the qualifying noun. "That must be the Quaker way of refusing grants."

4.

"So *exit* Joan flanked by two policemen ? My dear Mimi, do you mean to say the poor child may still be in jug ? But that's exquisite—"

"No, no—dee-ar—of course she isn't in prison. I rang her as soon as I got in. She said she'd persuaded the police that this man was drunk and disorderly and they'd removed him from the premises. She had to promise to write some letter or other first. That was all—"

"Anyhow her little skirmish with the Law put the wind up your good Quakeress, I dare say—"

"Really, Fleetwood, anyone would think you were positively *pleased* about it—"

"Pleased ? My dear Mimi—of course I'm not pleased. I just knew she'd come a cropper one day. That's all."

"And I can't tell you how dreadfully *unfair* I think it is, Fleetwood. She's so brilliant and so desperately hard-working—. Besides, she's so *utterly* dedicated. Only a *Sadhu* would put up with half her discomforts—"

"That, my dear, is precisely where the tragedy lies—"

"What do you mean ?"

"If she hadn't got a brain like an electric adding machine, if she didn't insist on working three times as hard as anyone else in the sub continent, and if she *occasionally* regretted a few of the minor comforts of life—well then there might be *some* hope that one day she'd turn into a human being."

## Five

ASHA sat singing outside the kitchen. She had a childish falsetto. The innocence of her voice was moving—or rather the discrepancy between that innocence and the emotion of which she sang.

Her relatives were squatting in a semi-circle on either side. The men cracking finger joints or wiggling limbs. The women preparing dozens of oil lamps in tiny clay vessels which they had bought that evening in the bazaar. Tomorrow was Diwali, festival of lights. Festival, too, of Kali—most terrible, most mysterious and, by some odd twist of Hindu logic, most compassionate of all the Mother Goddesses.

*Oh, Mother who can know thee unless thou first take pity?  
In vain is fast or study if thou not touch our hearts —  
Draw not thy sword 'gainst those of us who seek thee,  
We crave the sweet compassion of thy face.*

Joan sat in her office in the dark.

Two days back she had written to Nogen to meet her in the *bustee* this evening. She had taken his papers to hand to him, and had prepared a farewell speech. “— rather sadly decided—better to follow our different methods apart—hope one day to meet on same side of fence.” Nogen had not come. Instead she learned that he and other volunteers had been in the *bustee* earlier to distribute leaflets. Most of the people she spoke to had a copy of this leaflet twisted like a talisman in their loincloth.

Shorn of dialectical frills the gist of it was simple. It called for a mass meeting in Tram Bazaar that very evening to launch the sewage petition to the Corporation. If they failed to respond then a strike of scavengers, tram workers, and other Corporation employees would be staged and the strikers themselves would lay the foundations of the new drainage system with the help of

volunteer technicians. The leaflet ended with a stirring appeal. "Down with Malaria, Dysentery, Cholera, Typhoid, Plutocrats, and other Exploiters of the Poor ! "

Nogen had obviously swung the party and the Communist-dominated unions into the project in a big way. And all the time she had been assuming that he would attempt nothing until after the holidays were over. For once India had been too quick for her.

So I've failed ?

Failed ? Don't be a prize idiot. Why should you worry about this wretched little project ? Heaven knows there's enough else to keep you going. The green file marked "Social Change and the Joint Family," the blue marked "Caste and Class in Indian Factory Life," the red red marked "New Demographic Trends," the yellow—There you see, you don't even need the light to remember them all. You could find them blindfold, wedged into the wall cabinet that you've had specially constructed to hold them. Each one a book in chrysalis. The first sociologist of the new India—that's what the University Principal has already called you—

But I don't care a Ph.D. what the Principal called me. I'm interested in what I am. And what I am isn't half as big and important as you try to make out. Three months off ~~38~~ and not one single person to whom I can *turn*—just to be natural with, to talk about things, to meet on equal terms.

Oh really ! This self-pity—it's too tiresome for words.

It's not self-pity. Tell me one' single friend—real friend I mean—that I've ever had. Even when I was a child—

All right. Surely you haven't forgotten—?

Bruce ? Oh, for Heaven's sake leave *him* out of it. All that high-minded mixture of politics and sex. And that impossible, proletarian sculpture— Besides we've never even written to each other since the war.

Well—what about college ? You were popular enough there.

Was I? Yes, I suppose there *were* a few who thought me clever and integrated. Who expected help with their love affairs and their weekly essays—

Exactly. And it's still the same. Look what a reputation you've got because of your work. Look at the way Ford, Fulbright, Rockefeller come to you for advice—

But I don't want to give advice. I want to—

Go on. What do you want?

Oh, I don't know. It's too late anyway.

You mean you want to drift?

No, not that. At least not exactly. I'd only like to let up now and then. Not *always* to have to talk as if I was drafting a report—

Go on then. I'm not stopping you, Asha's out there in the courtyard whining away at the feet of old mother Kali. Why not join *her*? It's quite easy. You just have to get down on your knees and blubber. Stop trying to walk upright. Forget the twenty-five years in which you've trained yourself to resist.

Joan strode past the circle of lamplight just as Asha finished. She gave herself an air of purpose, as if on her way to the kitchen. Then she leaned back out of the kitchen door, apparently struck by an afterthought: "Oughtn't you to lie down, Asha, if you've still got a headache? A few hours ago you were feeling so miserable."

"Oh, my head's all right now," Asha muttered, her speaking voice a gruff contrast to her singing. Someone squeezed an ominous, high-pitched snarl out of the harmonium, and Asha sidled into another song. Joan turned away. The relatives remained impassive.

Joan decided to go to Tram Bazaar. She had stirred herself laboriously into a state of defiance. She would grasp the microphone and pour out a reckless flood of Bengali. The Communist Party merely exploited the poor as a means to power. She would prove it in a speech of passionate sincerity. Gradually mounting excitement in the crowd, fists shaken, murmurs of abuse. And on the

platform Communist big-wigs wearing the strained smiles of those who expect defeat.

2.

The square behind the tram terminus was packed.

Yet it was hard at first to tell through all the seething mass whether the meeting had begun. It looked more like a market day. The bazaar-wallahs had descended in force bearing trays prepared for tomorrow's festivities—*Pan*, balloons, sweetmeats, dolls, fruit drinks, funny men on string. They wove their way deftly through the crush plying a brisk trade. The audience was glad of the diversion. They knew that meetings were apt to last all night and they had no intention of giving this one more than intermittent heed. Only an occasional Party member in a red cap sat bolt upright and, with an air of dedicated concern, ignored the chatter, the bargaining, the games of checkers that surrounded him on all sides.

The women stood on the fringe, their babies listless on hips. They gazed sideways across the squatting crowd, *saris* pulled in front of their faces like oxygen masks. Mother Goddesses who had descended in disguise to brood tenderly over their human family.

Out in the shadow beyond range of spotlights, the meeting had fallen into confusion. Professional sight-seers had roosted on top of stationary trams. Police were blowing whistles and waving *lathis* in an unsuccessful effort to dislodge them.

Nogen was at the microphone. Every few seconds his voice swooped across the square with the rickening resonance of a jet aeroplane. He was reading out the ultimatum which they intended to present to the Corporation. Next to him on the platform was a Communist demi-god, garlanded and wearing his best Party smile. Only the wiggling of a smooth-skinned foot, flat on its opposing knee, disclosed the monotony of his meditations. Behind, a phalanx of fat comrades propped on stomachs.

Joan stumbled through the crowd, treading on limbs, knocking over a hawker's tray. She did not stop to apologise. A policeman attempted to intercept her. She shook him off. Nogen waved her up on to the platform. The phalanx of comrades made room, smiles broadening and deepening as they did so. Someone came forward with a garland. But instead of wearing it Joan held it fiercely in her hand till she crushed the juice from its petals.

"I want to speak, Mr. Dutt."

"There may not be chance."

"I want to speak now," and she seized the stem of the microphone.

He seized it back. "We must first talk with chairman of platform committee."

A sudden hush had fallen on the crowd. This was clearly one of the climaxes that demanded a deliberate act of attention.

Somehow Joan got her mouth to the instrument. "They are trying to prevent—"

Nogen, still smiling, covered the instrument with a Simian hand. "I have firstly to introduce you," he said. Then to the crowd: "I have now so lovely pleasure to show you our English comrade. She is worthy to stand with Florence Nightingale and we are definitely in luck to have her to sit with us here this evening." And he added, still in English, "I must have to translate her few gracious words for our better understandings."

"I shall speak in Bengali—so there will be no need," Joan said. And once more she turned the microphone firmly in her direction.

The white-clad crowd beneath her was as still as a poised avalanche. Even the bazaar-wallahs were motionless with interest—gestures of salesmanship frozen in mid-air. One day the crowd would break out of inertia. The avalanche would start to thunder towards the valley. Oh, Heavens, if only, before it was too late, she could help to harness its energy to co-operation and

peace. Up there on the platform she felt the first faint tremors beneath her.

She knew what she was going to say. And she had a strange and exciting confidence in her power to say it. She would start on a note of quiet pathos; describe her first discovery of the horrors of Calcutta sewage. Then the growth of the movement following her initiative and ideas. Nogen's intrusion and his eventual betrayal of their cause into the hands of the Party. At this stage—analysis of the Party's methods. Their interest in votes not drainage. How they would hold a pistol to the Corporation's head so that the Corporation was bound to refuse. How the Party wanted them to refuse, because it knew that, once the project failed, the people would grow more desperate and discontented. By contrast—Mahatma Gandhi's Royal Road: the way of peace, hard work, and mutual trust.

Joan warmed to her task. Forgot that this was the first time she had ever made a public speech in Bengali. Then suddenly she noticed that her own enthusiasm was not being transmitted to others. The avalanche had broken apart into a thousand confused fragments. Traders were circulating with ostentatious fervour. There was an irritated shifting of buttocks, a puzzling murmur of boredom. Even those of the audience who had no one to talk to had wrapped themselves in their cotton shawls and were rocking backwards and forwards as if sleep was their only possible escape. ;

Joan did what she would do when faced with a ragged and inattentive class. She grasped the stem of the microphone as if it was a blackboard pointer and tapped it severely on the ground. The microphone emitted not even the smallest crackle. The current had been switched off. She turned in protest to the comrades behind.

They pretended to take the pause as the end of her speech and rose as one man clapping and cheering and smiling. They drenched her with the brilliant smiles normally reserved for those who have just let loose a



stream of platitudes. Then the chairman came forward with garlands to escort her to her seat.

Joan stood rooted to the spot. It was like that nightmare when, pursued by some unnameable horror, we cannot lift our feet off the ground to flee. She turned—the chairman anticipated her, holding the garlands up like a noose. She dodged to the side and a posse of damnably smiling comrades blocked her way.

At last she escaped. She stumbled to the corner of the platform, scrambled over the edge and disappeared.

### 3.

There was a wedding in Sen Street. The bridegroom's party was approaching down the narrow road. The bridegroom, on a palanquin, wearing the traditional crown of tinsel and paper flowers. In front was a brass band blaring a cruel parody of a Sousa march. The crowd flattened Joan against the wall as it passed. The whole of the neighbourhood seemed to have been sucked in.

She remembered now. The bride was some up-country cousin of Gan-Babu. Asha had been asked to the ceremony, but not herself. That wasn't surprising really. The hostel after all was detached from the surrounding life. A new idea, imposed but not yet assimilated. And to the hostel she herself was no more than an appendage, its most foreign and precarious element. Yes, she was at a double removed from Sen Street. She had always said so. . . . At a double removed from all the surrounding life, which drifted by—lazy, complacent, aloof—just out of reach. Somehow it spotlighted the end of another dream. The dream that she could fight the turbulent squalor of the *bustees*. Was there anywhere left in the whole of India where she *could* be, of use any more?

### 4.

The hostel had undergone some sort of a change since Joan had left for the meeting. A low and continuous moan came from one of the upper balconies, like an

uneasy spirit brooding over the courtyard. Before she had time to go and see what had happened Joan noticed a shadow motionless against one of the dark cloister pillars. The shadow had a *sari* drawn over its head. A married shadow.

Kolyani !

The wide, quiet face, cheek pressed against pillar, lids half-closed, was unmistakable. Particularly now that she smiled.

"I had your letter, Joan."

"You've come very quickly."

"I came ~~at~~ once."

"Oh, my dear, I do hope your daughter's all right."

"Oh, yes, *she's* all right. I got Arjun to ring from my brother's flat."

"You mean there's *never* been anything wrong with her? Then Robbi invented the whole thing? Now, really that's too sickening. Of course it's my fault. I ought to have guessed. I ought to have refused to write. I get so utterly exhausted—"

"No—I'm glad you told me."

"But all this worry—all this waste of time—"

"I've not been worried, *Didi*. At least not about Gita," she paused: "You see, I was sure there was nothing really the matter with *her*—"

"Sure? I don't understand—"

"My husband's often tried the same trick—"

"Then why on earth have you come back?"

Kolyani glanced away across the courtyard; then she turned back with quiet defiance. "It's my husband. He's the one who needs me—"

"You mean you've come just because of all the fuss he's been making? But, Kolyani, it's monstrous. You simply *can't* let him get away with it—"

"Then who is to look after him, *Didi*?"

Once more a cause summoned her, momentarily cancelling the past. Joan seized Kolyani's hands: "Look, my dear, you *must* be realistic. You *must* face the gravity of your husband's condition—"

"Isn't that just what I am doing?"

"Then can't you see that he ought to be in a sanatorium? Somewhere quiet where he can get protection and professional care? It's not just that he's an alcoholic, Kolyani. He's ill in his mind as well."

Kolyani gave a sad smile. "And you think that doctors can cure that?"

"I'm not saying they could. But at least they'll get as near to it as yourself—"

"Then if that's all doctors can do, *Didi*, I've still got the right to be with him."

"Doctors know their job."

"But wives don't charge for knowing theirs."

Joan shook her head: "Oh, well, I can see it's absolutely useless trying to talk to you, Kolyani."

Then she turned away. How she hated this obstinate passion for self-destruction. Why on earth must Indian women still turn love into a creeping paralysis of the will, a useless martyrdom endured with heroic fortitude? The aftermath of *suttee*, of course. For, even though it was a hundred years since the last widow committed ritual suicide, beauty, brains, goodness of heart were still hurled daily into the flames.

Kolyani followed her meekly into the office. She was pulling her *sari* round and across her mouth, clinging timidly to the corner of the door. It was clear that she was hurt by Joan's resentment. At length she joined her palms in half-humorous supplication. Could she and the children stay until tomorrow? Krishna was expected back at midnight and she had left a message with Anu to tell her brother where they were. She didn't like to stay at the flat since Robbi might turn up there any minute. After all, whatever she was going to do, it would be wrong to do it before seeing her brother. He had taken so much trouble over the whole thing.

Joan was furiously emptying the contents of her Gladstone bag. "Yes, yes, you can stay. Of course. Surely you know that—." Then she stopped. "Who's that

moaning upstairs? Is somebody ill again?"

"It's Asha, *Didi*. She's got fever. She said you'd worry. She didn't want you to know."

Didn't want her to know? That alone was enough to send Joan hurrying to the bedside. She ought to have made less noise if she *really* meant it to be secret.

Asha was on a wooden cot—swathed in her white *sari*. With lips parted, wet hair hanging almost to the ground, and the fevered alienation of sickness in her eyes, she looked like some dusky, pre-Raphaelite martyr painted on her bier. There were eight people clustered round her; for in Bengal illness is a public event and the pious are drawn to the bedside to visit the Divine Mother present in the sick. Sickness on the eve of Kali Festival was clearly a very special and privileged visitation and the children were making the most of it. Chitu had spread a banana leaf on his aunt's pillow and was busy ladling water over her forehead into a bucket beneath. Kolyani's daughter was digging briskly into the patient's leg muscles, while one of Asha's cousins was kneading her forearms and wrists. To all this interest Asha responded with chattering teeth and suitably dramatic and death-like groans.

Joan had her own equally hallowed ritual. She had taught herself the rudiments of diagnosis so as to cut out the damaging delay that followed the dispatch of specimens to Curzon College Hospital. And after months of bullying, the university had equipped the hostel with a miniature laboratory so that Joan could carry out simple tests. Having never had a single day's illness herself since coming to India—beyond one impacted wisdom tooth and two dust colds—she was a tigress when it came to defending the health of her brood.

"Asha, I don't believe you've taken your *paludrin* since the holidays started. You *really* are quite hopeless."

Kolyani was waiting for her at the bottom of the stairs. "I'm sorry, *Didi*, I'm afraid you're having a tiring day."

"No, not tiring. Just a little exasperating, that's all."

All this resignation gets me down. I'm sorry I make it so obvious—"  
half welcome.

For a moment Joan hesitated. She felt some power tugging at her as the tide tugs at a rooted water weed. Then she walked on into the cubicle that she used as a laboratory.

"We have a story about Sitala—do you know it, Joan?" Kolyani said to her through the open door. "Sitala is the Goddess of illness and misfortune. She rides on a washerman's donkey and carries a bucket and broom. Sometimes, by mistake she leaves her bucket in

Kolyani opened her arms in a gesture half sympathy, a house that she has visited. And the doctor, not realising to whom the bucket belongs, has the sweeper put the infected linen in it and bury it outside in the compound. So then Sitala has to return again and again to look for her bucket and, each time she comes, she leaves some fresh disaster behind her . . ."

But Joan was not listening. "There," she exclaimed, "I knew I was right. Asha's blood smear is simply treachery with bugs."

5.

"Asha? Good heavens woman, what do you think you're doing?" Joan was spooning up her breakfast. She had hardly slept during the night and the spiced *gram* tasted like iron filings.

"Mixing the children's milk, *Jo-Di*."

"Then go and lie down immediately."

"Fever's gone this morning—"

"Gone—? Don't be absurd, you know you'll have another bout later. We'll have to send you to hospital if you can't behave."

Asha, who could not remember a year free from malaria, had her own way of dealing with it. Grown to the full while the fever was on and then forget about it

in the regular pause between bouts. In this way one rationed self-pity to a limited period and, when the agony *did* come, felt no compunction about giving it full play. European ideas of "staying in bed" seemed undramatic and boring by contrast. Joan had almost to force the milk pail out of Asha's hands:

"I'll give the children their milk, Asha. I want to check over the list anyhow. We used more than our quota again last month . . ."

Asha squatting on her haunches cast a swollen and sulky eye across the courtyard.

To start off with there was trouble over the cards. These should have shown name of mother, date of expected birth of child or age of child at breast. But very few cards remained and those that did were so grubby and screwed up that they were quite illegible. One bright little lad candidly justified the loss of his card on the grounds that his sister had died before the holidays and that, therefore, his mother didn't need a card since she now took the milk to market instead of drinking it herself.

At this point Joan began to ask all the children for a description of what happened to the milk that they took home. But the answers obtained were so confusing that she decided to leave the whole question till the start of term so that Chitra and Nilu could visit the families in turn.

There was one little girl, however, whom Joan was determined to exclude. She was well dressed in bright cotton and red sandals. She had two well-oiled pigtails. She said her family name was Chakravarty and her house in Sen Street.

"Chakravarty? Sen Street? But this milk is for the *bustee* children not Brahmins."

"Asha-*Didi* gives it to me—from a separate Brahmin bucket, too."

"She has no right to."

"But you have lots, and lots left—"

"We shall use it tomorrow."

"Oh, no—milk goes bad if it's kept."

"Not when it's made from milk powder. Now, will you run along home please?"

The little girl was not to be daunted and Joan gave her an experimental push towards the gate. The girl stuck her legs into the passageway as rigidly as a frightened animal.

"Are you going or aren't you?"

The child looked up and gave a quick shake of the head.

"Then I shall have to force you out—that's all."

"No you won't."

The round, honey-coloured face was thrust up in a defiant grimace. It was like a squeezed orange and had something about it almost intolerably prim. The posture was tempting. Joan lifted her hand and brought it down smack against the cheek. Not a hard slap, but accurate. It was the first success she had registered in twenty-four hours.

"Who was that girl, Asha?"

"You know her, *Jō-Di*—"

"I know her—what do you mean?"

"Yes. She came one evening. With a letter."

"What evening? What letter?"

"First evening *Krishna Babu* was here."

Joan thought for an instant. "You mean she's from *Gan Babu's* family?"

"His daughter. Eldest daughter."

"Good Heavens—you've not been giving milk to them, Asha? How could you—"

"His wife nearly died after that last baby was born."

"I daresay. But this milk is for the destitute. I thought I'd explained that."

"Sen Street's milk is watered. You said so yourself—"

"Then *Gan Babu* can afford to buy better. I've told you before, Sen Street is able to look after itself."

*Kolyani* had appeared above them and was hoisting

children on to a balcony. They were garlanded and daubed with *kohl* and *alta* in honour of Kali, the Mother, whose Great Day had started. The children waved, exhibiting themselves with enthusiasm.

"All the same it was bad that you slapped the little girl, *Jo-Di*."

"Bad? I'd have done it harder if I'd known who she was."

And she thought—I haven't lost my temper in years. It's done me good.

## Six

IT WAS the best kind of autumn day—high, wide, and handsome. An eighty-degree sun lingered in half-mocking affection along the streets. The University, which in a less flattering light might have looked like a brewery built in the Gothic Revival, purred contentedly in the tender, glittering air. Blackened tea-stalls, lopsided advertisements (why must the Indians depicted in them be as faceless and fair-skinned as Disney's Snow White?), sweetmeats piled within a few inches of a heap of road-sweepings—even Calcutta's dreariest features positively glowed with innocence. The sun rode high on a feathery surf of cloud.

The pavements down College Street were crowded. Kali Festival was fuel to the Indian passion for commerce. Anyone who had anything to sell was squatting hopefully in the gutter, trinkets laid out in front of them on sacks, handkerchiefs, or pieces of rag. On one side of the road Sikh merchants had claimed the line of trees, and now roosted in them bearded and broody. Silk turbans hung from branches, fluttering like prayer flags, pink, white, yellow, mauve. "Only six rupees," murmured the bearded tree-keepers; "six rupees only and fit for a



Moghul or a Rajput Prince." They had bound smouldering jute string to the tree trunks so that passers-by could light their cigarettes, much as a department store runs a theatre agency to attract custom.

Krishna stumbled on over goods laid out for sale on the pavement, scattering at one point a box of cobbler's nails, at another a pile of plastic watch straps. He paused, dropped an eight-anna piece into the counters he had disturbed, then set off again without a word. His gaze, dedicated but unhurried, was lifted once more to the tree tops and the space beyond.

He was, from any angle, an odd sight—a walking parody of his own assumption of zeal. Neck thrust out like a belligerent tortoise, stiff legs at work in an action half shuffle, half piston thrust, narrow shoulders hunched.

God and the world. Normally he lived in a twilight between the two. The world on one side—a painted curtain hiding an empty stage. God on the other—a formidable and all but inaudible voice rumbling from the pit. Then suddenly for brief periods the two were no longer opposed. They coincided. He was free to act. It was not will-power that brought them together. For he mistrusted will-power and its Christian habit of hiding self-interest under high-sounding names. It was rather a moment of Grace, of divine revelation. Everything he saw was transformed by the blazing purity of the Absolute. Action possessed him until he was lost in it as a singer is lost in his music and until, like the song—it passed.

2.

"But it's not really for your sake that I'm asking it, *Khuki*," and he smiled like a conjurer on the point of producing rabbits.

"Then whose?"

"Ah, who else could there be?"

Kolyani hesitated: "Joan?"

Krishna pursed his lips and patted the bunched folds of his *dhoti*. "I've got a jolly good plan," he seemed to say. "But you'll have to work for it. I'm not going to give secrets away for nothing."

Kolyani responded with a shake of the head, humorous, puzzled. "Joan? But *Dada* I don't understand."

"You told me as soon as I came that she was worn out. And so I thought of this. A month in the autumn countryside—"

"But she could go without *me*, *Dada*."

"No, *Khuki*, Joan must have a cause. She'd never go just for her own health. She must have something to fight for."

"But surely it's not a proper cause. Just persuading me not to go back to Robbi, I mean. Besides won't her term be starting?"

"Aha!" Krishna tapped his nose, then came further in from the cloister. "The trouble is, *Khuki*, there may not be a term."

"What do you mean?"

"That girl."

"What girl?"

"Gan *Babu's* daughter?"

"The one she slapped?"

"Gan *Babu's* getting up a petition. 'We the undersigned, law-abiding, and patriotic citizens—'"

"A petition? But what about?"

"Asking for Joan to be removed from Sen Street. What else in the circumstances would they petition for? According to Asha they already have 73 signatures."

"Joan doesn't know about it?"

"No, no—indeed not. They plan to send it to the University tomorrow. That's why I've just been to see the Vice-Chancellor."

"You've told him?"

Krishna clicked his tongue and turned to go. Then appeared to think better of it: "The Vice-Chancellor's furious. He's convinced that Joan has voluntarily handed

over her sewage scheme to the Communists. He's always thought her much too radical. Did you see that absurd photograph in the *Alipur Patrika*? A string of obviously male comrades and Joan's name included in the caption underneath. Poor Joan—even we journalists, it seems, are in the plot—”

When Krishna laughed, he wrapped himself round his laughter as if it was a secret which he could not quite sufficiently hide. This gave it first, a bursting quality; a force and infectiousness quite out of proportion to the noise he made: secondly, an undertone; one felt that the reason for such laughter must lie in some shade of meaning one had been too coarse-grained to notice for oneself. But Kolyani who had seen this characteristic laughter grow from less imposing beginnings, was not impressed by the mystery of it. When Krishna ended by coughing, she said: “You're smoking too much again, *Dada*,” and started to pat him on the back. Then she added: “If the Vice-Chancellor acts on the petition—surely that will be the time for Joan to take a holiday?”

“Aha!” Krishna held up his hand. Pontifical. Gazed at her sternly over the top of his battered spectacles, his mouth drooped at the corners: “We can stop the petition, *Khuki*. This evening I shall call on Gan Babu. I shall send in my card—the one with M.A. Oxon, and Lecturer in Economics on it. I still have a few left. Gan Babu will assume that I am from the University and that I have heard of what has happened. Not that anything will be said, of course. He'll produce Festival sweets—*labanga lattika* perhaps, Asha says he comes from East Bengal—while I talk gravely of Miss Raydon's breakdown due to overwork. Describe how glad we are that she has agreed to take a rest. Wonder whether, in the circumstances it is quite fair to hold her fully responsible for her action—”

“Joan—”

“Yes?”

"We're going out."

"Who are *we*?"

"You and I."

"Me? But I'm—"

"BUSY? Then that's all the more reason for a break—"

"But Krishna—"

"We're going to the Diwali Fair—"

"I'm sorry. I can't." , "

"What is it?" He stood over her desk with the condescending air of a grandparent helping with the homework.

"My lectures. For next session. On local government."

"Good. That settles it. You've always said politics bored you."

"Yes—but—"

He clinched with an appeal to punctuality: "I've booked a table at a Chinese restaurant for 8 o'clock. We'd better hurry if we're going to the fair."

"My good man—you really are quite impossible," but as she stood up a smile spread slowly over her face, making it suddenly beautiful. It was a broad, full smile. Not the wry imitation that she had practised during recent weeks.

### 3.

The Diwali Fair had erupted over a square mile in the southern section of the town. The thoroughfares were packed with stalls set up by peasants who had brought in the goods traditional to the festival. Pith birds swung from hoods stretched over the stalls, wooden dolls, painted pots, and bright straw mats jostled each other on the tables. Even cows and goats had been drawn to the fair as if by some collective olfactory unconscious. They browsed on rotten melons, fruit rinds, and coconut husks in roads normally shut to them by wildly hooting traffic.

Each side street was devoted to a different type of commodity. In the "sweet" quarter the air itself seemed to have turned to syrup, so heavy was the vapour exhaled

from steaming iron bowls. In the cloth shops turbaned or *dhoti*-clad shopkeepers sat cross-legged on a dais of piled cloth. They stared impassively from the cool, cloth-hung recesses of their caverns at the stream chafing the edge. We are the aristocrats of trade. Regard the perfection of our Buddha pose. We do not want custom, but respect. We are here only to dissociate ourselves from the uninhibited hubbub of the streets.

At whatever stall they stopped Krishna established a relationship. Views were exchanged on the ways of God and man, chairs were called for and from inner sanctuaries goods of special rarity appeared. Joan was loaded with gifts: brass figures, embroidery, toys. Krishna listened imperturbably to her protests and then added another purchase. Joan wished that she found the dust and crush less irritating or that she could at least pretend to be the kind of female whom Krishna so obviously wanted. She watched the holiday-makers, laughing, quarrelling, fingering goods laid out on the stalls. Could they really forget the conditions in which they lived? And even if *they* could, did that mean it would be right for *her* to forget them, too? Surely every minute of every waking day should be turned to the best possible advantage.

At sunset the Diwali lamps were lit. They had been placed on doorways, window-ledges, roofs. They covered the whole city with a trellis of gentle liquid light. Some minutes later the sound of gongs and conches broke from a thousand temples. What an odd contrast between this barbaric fanfare and its background of tiny, trembling lamps. The fanfare heralded the climax of the Bengali year. Kali was coming. Our Earth-mother, God's dark, mysterious counterpart. The first goat was sacrificed at Kali-Ghat Temple. Soon whole courtyards would be hissing with a hot steam of blood.

Joan said: "No, Krishna, I really do draw the line there. I refuse to take her—"

"Yes," he agreed, "soap-stone is a poor medium. All the same, he's done it quite well."

"Oh, it's not the soap-stone I object to. It's jolly old Kali. That red tongue panting for blood—"

"Ah, Joan—if you'll forgive me, you're a little—confused." Krishna squeezed out the word "confused" with a shake of his spindly forefinger and a smile of indignant surprise. By this means it was made to sound an absurd understatement. "The tongue is red, I agree. But with shame—not blood. Look—she is leaping up to defend us from the demon—and as she does so, she treads by mistake on her consort who is still asleep. What an insult in India for even a king to tread on his servant! How much worse for a wife! Kali puts out her tongue in horror and remorse—just as if she was a modest village bride. And she raises her right hand in a gesture of benediction. She says: 'Terror is part of Creation. I accept my share of the blame for it. But, look—even behind my drawn sword—you can find the hidden hand of love.'"

Joan was firm: "No, I'm afraid I still can't live in your world of symbols," and she replaced the eight-inch figure on the ground. "But it's not just that I object to Kali herself. India's whole idea of sculpture seems wrong to me. Sculpture is the one art based on fact. That's why I understand it, why to me it's superior to all other arts. Sculpture should be like a text-book, building its meaning from given data. It can use emphasis, but with discrimination—just as a good text-book arranges its facts in paragraphs, prints headings in bold caps, summarises in italics to emphasise what it is trying to say. But in your sculpture everything is emphasised equally. Not just two arms per body, but four, six, eight, ten—and eyes, heads, legs to match, each one loaded with ornaments and symbols till the meaning becomes utterly confused—"

The sculptor squatted on a mat of sackings, looking up. At length he broke out in Bengali: "Bab, Doesn't the *Memsahib* like our Mother?"

Krishna replied gravely: "I'm trying to persuade her to take our Mother to England."

The sculptor jumped to his feet: "To England? Then would the *Mem* mind if I wrote my name on the base? Just 'Phor<sup>o</sup> Bhushan Pal'? I would like to think my name was known in England."

"But who could read Bengali writing there, Bhushan *Mcbae*?"

"Then my nephew can write it in English, *Babu*. Although he's still in pants, he's already in Grade IV."

Joan said: "Really, Krishna, you shouldn't tell the poor man such outrageous lies. I've told you already that I flatly refuse to let you give me Kali. I wouldn't have come out with you if I'd known you were going to start this present-giving mania again. It's too childish—"

The sculptor was anxious: "What does the *Memsahib* say, *Babu*?"

"She admires your work and hopes that you will teach your skill to your nephew. She desires you not to use soapstone, but to seek out a substance with a harder surface." Krishna had drawn out a twenty-rupee note.

"But *Babu* I would like the *Mem* to have our Mother for nothing."

"It is I who am giving you the money."

"Then the *Mem* will not take her?"

"Later, perhaps—"

Calcutta's Bathing *Ghats*, built round a network of canals diverted from the Hooghly, run like secret passageways deep in the heart of the city. Tonight the canals, shining rivers of ink, lapped quietly against their marble steps. Shrines along the banks were deserted. Palms leaned like sentinels against the moon. Yet a sense of human piety lingered in the silence. The faithful had decorated the shrines and the bushes of myrtle and jasmin with a lacy tissue of lights. Dozens of tiny lamps winked back secretly at the stars.

When they stopped an instant on the steps of one of

the *Ghats* Krishna said: "Joan, you must sit. Give way to the atmosphere. Let weeks of strain slip silently into the darkness—"

"You sound like a psycho-analyst—" but she settled herself, nonetheless, into a groin of the marble balustrade.

A widow came down the steps between them, darting her head from side to side, quick and quiet as an antelope that had ventured into the open to drink. She had made a tiny ship of birch bark, loaded with flowers and a twinkling light. She stood for a moment watching it disappear, thinking perhaps once again of those who had sailed before her into the darkness beyond.

Krishna had settled himself on top of the balustrade on the other side. "Hummmmm."

"I'm afraid I can't hear you when you mumble—"

"Down at Rampur—our family house. I want you to try and persuade her not to go back to Robbi. Succeed where I've failed. She's agreed to go as long as you'll go with her—"

"My dear, I'd be glad to try—you know that—though I haven't the slightest influence over Kolyani. But how can I go to Rampur? Term starts in a few days—"

He waited for a moment; then threw a half-spent cigarette hissing into the water. "Joan, this is important." "But it's not reasonable, Krishna. You know it isn't."

It was a long time before he replied. He was listening to the innumerable sounds of the evening which could be heard beneath the silence. The ripple of water, traffic, cymbals clanking, tugs hooting, the buzz of another bazaar and, weaving them together, a bamboo flute, lifting and dipping, dipping and lifting, as if the autumn breeze itself had turned to music. Why can't we accept humans in the same way as we accept nature? Isn't it sheer madness to wish to change others to mould, to develop them?

At last he swung his feet off the balustrade with a decisive clatter; "I've spoken to Hem Babu." o

"To Hem Babu? You mean the Vice-Chancellor?"



"Yes, he's a relative of ours. Or had I told you? His grandfather and mine were first cousins. Our family became Westernised very early—long before it was popular. His grandmama actually dared to wear a bodice and become a Christian. I suppose that's why we didn't see much of him as kids."

"Oh, my dear Krishna—are *you* Westernised?" The silence was striped with exclamation marks. "As far as I'm concerned you retreat further East every day."

"Retreat? I like the verb." And taking his cue from it, Krishna wandered away behind her, looking at the shrines on the slope of the bank.

She found this prevarication tiresome. "Well, come on—what did you see Hem *Babu* about?"

He wandered back to the head of the steps. "*Accha*, Hem *Babu*." Then he stood there stroking his lips with a fresh cigarette and gazing myopically across the canal. "Hem *Babu* thinks you need a few weeks rest."

"Thanks very much. What does he propose to do about it?"

"Release you."

"I see. And who's going to take over the hostel?"

"A temporary warden could be found."

"My lectures?"

"They could be postponed for a week or two."

"You seem to have arranged things pretty neatly."

Joan was sitting bolt upright now, butting the air with her chin. He imagined her mole glowing with controlled displeasure.

He came down the steps, loose sandal straps slapping the wet marble.

"Joan, listen—I think you need this holiday, too."

She sighed: "Oh, Krishna—please stop trying to be helpful. It'd be so much easier." He gave a humorous grunt—"Yes, I know it sounds rude. But I'm sorry. I can't help it. What you've done is really disgraceful. Hem *Babu's* the last person I'd choose to have approached behind my back. You know he's never approved of the

hostel. Besides it's so wrong to make use of family connections in this way."

"Oriental nepotism. The roots of influence and string pulling in the joint family system. What about your post-graduate students, Joan? They might take that as subject for a thesis—"

"Don't be facetious, Krishna. That's no help at all."

Krishna settled down in comfortable and deliberate contrast beside her. He was inhaling slowly and looking up at the stars: "*Accha*, Joan. I wonder if you've any idea how beautiful it can be at Rampur in the autumn? The scent of *neem* sap and dew, millions of fireflies darting through the thickets. Paddy fields gleaming in the moonlight like sheets of beaten silver. It's a pity you're not going to see it—"

Joan was fixing one of the precipitous curls along the ridge of her head. Krishna reflected that when she was irritated she usually had difficulty with her hair—perhaps because she tossed it about too much. "Oh," she said, taking the last hairpin out of her mouth, "I'll go for a few days. You hardly leave me much choice. But heaven only knows how I shall get things ready for next term." She gave it to him with a menace of martyrdom—one of those gifts that was meant to be refused. But Krishna was back in twilight relaxation. Acceptance was once again his watchword.

This complacency added a final twist to her irritation. Not one word of apology or thanks. She stood up. Shook herself, looked at her damnably luminous watch. "It's 9.15. I thought we had to be at that restaurant by eight."

He yawned. "Ah, yes, the inexorable logic of the stomach—"

"You said you'd booked. Or was that another of your white lies?" And she thought—so this is what happens when I get sentimental. I might have known.

Then she stalked off up the steps, leaving her bag of presents behind.

Both the children were asleep, using their mother as a bolster.

"What happened, *Dada*?" Kolyani whispered.

"I've been thinking, *Khuki*. You must take Joan to see Sivananda. She's never seen a live saint. It might possibly do her good."

A few minutes later he stumped gloomily back again. "Just imagine. Can *Babu* didn't serve *labanga lattika*. Only third-rate *sandesh* bought from the bazaar. Twenty years ago no middle-class family would have dreamed of *buying* their Festival sweets."

# PART TWO



# One

JOAN sat up, chin on her knees. This was her third morning at Rampur. Like the other two it had been spent in sleep.

It was not so much the silence. She wouldn't admit that to be soporific. Besides was there ever complete silence in India? Even now she could hear the *khokil* chuckling as it hopped from branch to branch; lazy hummings and hammerings from the direction of the village; one of the innumerable women of the house pounding spice and another, clothes. Silence was mere absence of sound. The thoughts in one's head were often louder than a Calcutta bazaar. What was it then? How should lying on the veranda here be like basking in cool water? Why should the very air seem steeped in something mellow and languid and sensual. Shadow, perhaps?

Joan snatched at a circling mosquito. Her taste for prose reasserted itself. She thought: Shadow is mere absence of light.

She was familiar enough, of course, with the sprawling middle-class households of Calcutta. The ones with barley sugar battlements and scroll-work round the door. If wealthy they were cluttered with leather pouffes and American magazines, if poor they exuded, like Gan Babu's, a depressing smell of mildew and mustard oil. In all cases they seemed planned to create the maximum inconvenience within the smallest space. Staircases jiggled up and down, overhanging eaves waited to strike the unwary, unexpected steps competed for broken limbs, while the darker corners were piled with tins and baskets and decades of dust. The domestic arts in Bengal were a national blind spot like the English inability to sing and the Russian to paint. To Joan a house should be as neat as a card index.

The Bannermans at Rampur certainly didn't inhabit a card index. Then neither could their dwelling strictly be

called a house. It was more like a tree. An age-old banyan tree, haphazard and rambling, that dropped suckers of mud or concrete back into the earth from which it had sprung. Yet for all its lack of design it was curiously self-enclosed. Only a few small windows gave on to the outside world and these were all shuttered and barred. The verandas faced inwards. Even the outer courtyard was fronted with a ten-foot wall. Such a building had clearly been meant to guard the exclusiveness of caste and female *purdah*. Yet today it had turned these limitations into a virtue. It had become a resting place and not a prison.

Outside was the riot of autumn—the world of mists, melons, and mutating sun. Young paddy soaked the earth in chlorophyll. And in the middle of this green sea lay the village of Rampur, islanded on its shady tumulus of trees. Here in the undergrowth a mutiny of weeds and briars, and bushes and creepers had broken out and, above, on the outer branches, blossom had settled like a cloud of butterflies. The sun—more brilliant still than even the midsummer sun of Europe—had found its match. It was no longer solo; the earth responded with a dazzling tumult of music.

None of this was excluded from the dark, ramshackle house. It was, rather, reflected, transmuted, as if in some hidden pool. Branches wove shadow patterns on an inner wall, a brilliant parroquet edged along the thatch with a wisp of straw, flame-coloured blossoms floated through the courtyard from overhanging trees. In the cool, thick rooms a whisper filtered through like the faint, flickering iridescence on the bed of a pool.

Not that the rooms, although they had never seen the sun, were musty. They secreted the warm fresh scent of linen cupboards or well-kept libraries. And this was mixed with something else—sap, clay, straw, mango-blossom, and cloves. A dark, intoxicating scent, at once aphrodisiac and sleeping draught. I, too, have enjoyed the orgy, but now I must sleep between bouts.

Joan frowned and sucked in her cheeks. There I go again—lapsing into the all-pervasive Hindu vagueness. If I really want to be precise I must fish out one of my little black books and start making notes. Describe the family structure and what it really is that marks it out as unusual.

Someone was hanging out her *sari* to dry in the next courtyard. Slap, slap, slap—back from the bathing tank her feet left a trail of wet along the marble floor. A coil of gleaming black hair hung heavily in the folds of her dress. Joan waved a limp hand in greeting and received a graceful *namaskar*. Who was she? Aunt, cousin, niece, sister-in-law? After two days Joan had not begun to sort out the various branches. Yet she was, it seemed, the guest of the whole family—not just of one section of it. When she arrived all 48 members rose in a body to welcome her. Each of her meals was brought by a different retinue, carrying bell metal vessels and plates heaped with mounds of rice. And the retinue stayed at the end of the veranda while she ate. Not nudging one another, not giggling—but discreet, dignified, cheerful. Twice a day, morning and afternoon, somebody shyly dropped in for an intimate chat. Never the same person and never more than one. The tota it seemed was carefully organised.

The queen bee, hub, keystone, doorkeeper was, of course, Krishna's mother, known to all as "*Ma*." On the morning they arrived, she advanced at the head of her clan with hands raised high above her head like the leader of a Greek chorus invoking the gods. Kolyani to it down to take the dust off *Ma's* feet in the attitude of respectful affection traditional between children and parents. But it was not to Kolyani that the old woman turned. It was to Joan. "Ah, Miss Joan, you haven't been to us before. But why not? Did you think we wouldn't like you? Here Miss Joan is some water to wash hands and feet. You must have sherbet and then you must rest. You have been working too hard in Calcutta."

*Ma* was squat and heavily built with the square face of a Red Indian squaw. The sort of face that children draw, its features, one up and three across, all perfectly straight. Its first meaning was "obvious enough; good-natured determination. Recently she had had a bad stroke—that's why she walked a little stiffly. From this she had rescued herself by will-power. A doctor was fetched from Calcutta—one of the best—but when he came she had recovered consciousness and refused all medical aid. Instead she asked for a French grammar. Her husband, mystified, half believing he had misunderstood her, wrote to town to procure one. Then the old lady, although still paralysed, sat propped on her pillows, while a great-niece turned over the pages. She had decided to learn French. And soon her study and her illness had both progressed so far that she was able to crouch over the cook-pot with a copy of *Manon Lescaut* precariously open on her knee.

*Ma's* will-power was not self-will, but family will. She had identified herself utterly with the needs of the family. Even her decision to recover from her stroke and to find a new interest that could help her do so, was due to the fact that she knew the family still needed her. This will-power was combined with an inflexible gentleness of manner. She scarcely ever spoke above a whisper.

*Ma* visited Joan every evening. She announced "I am coming to talk to Miss Joan," as she hobbled heavily along the veranda. And Joan prepared a mat and bolster, so that *Ma* could squat bolt upright swathed in shawls against the chill November night.

Joan tried at first to persuade *Ma* that Kolyani ought not to be allowed to return to her husband. Joan spoke in English, for *Ma* understood English perfectly although she did not trust herself to speak it. *Ma* listened gravely, making little sideways movements with her head and eyes as though he was watching the words take shape and dance away like fireflies in the darkness.



She did not answer directly. She said: "Men are such dear, dear children,"—and the words "*pree-o, pree-o, chele-pele*" had a sweet gravity and no hint of affectation. "Perhaps in England you understand things differently. But here we say—let us be equal with men, but let us not try to be the same. It's the great pride that is in them. For what man would ever admit that a woman could wout him in argument? Men think they are all head. That's their weakness. They forget to defend their hearts. So that's why, if they do something naughty, we don't argue. We fast or take a vow of silence or go without spice. Sooner or later the men-folk give way for shame at seeing us suffer."

To argue with *Ma*—yes, obviously futile. As well play fives against a haystack with a ball of worsted. But Joan floundered on, goading herself into indignation, making nervous, stabbing gestures with her lean arms and muscular hands. Why cannot we women give ourselves to a great idea as well as to our families? *Ma's* reply was simple:

"If the idea is our own—then we are no longer giving."

Next, Joan invoked the God of Society, the sacred art of healing, the beauties of nursing, and social work. All these meant people. People who had as much claim on Kolyani as her soused dish-cloth of a husband. But *Ma* stuck implacably to principles. She did not even mention Kolyani by name.

"Only saints, or spinsters, or widows," she said, "can afford to treat the world at large as their children"

But *Ma* herself did not follow her own precepts. Didn't she clearly treat the world as a child—even call it so to its face? And the world responded. The entire village of Rampur regarded her as Mother. Last year Kolyani's father, who ran the family estate, evicted some tenants. *Ma* thought the tenants had been wrongly treated and went on a fast. After five days of coconut water she had won her point. The tenants returned. Yet: "Only saints, or spinsters, or widows—"

"So you count yourself as a saint?" Joan asked, smiling.

"I? Oh, no—not I. Old bones like mine don't count. Just a few dried peppers rattling in a tin."

The veranda was dark. Was *Ma* smiling as she spoke? Hard to tell. She had become a motionless shape in the shadow. Brooding and heavy and hooded, like some legendary bird.

This was the first and last time that Joan attempted a discussion of Kolyani. From now on it was Krishna who bobbed in and out of their talk like a ship in a mist. With her son, *Ma* shared a mystical refinement of feeling. While studying in England he happened to write how unpalatable he found the English preparation of fish. *Ma* promptly gave up fish out of sympathy—although it was the only flesh taken by Bengali Hindus and the greatest delicacy of their kitchen. Krishna did not learn of his mother's gesture till a year later when he met a visiting relative. Thereupon he buried himself in an Oxford fish and chip shop. Wrote home that he had at last acquired a taste for it, convincingly described the huge pans sizzling with the fry and even the glazed tiles with their black and white chess-board pattern. Nothing more was said. His mother understood what had happened. She quietly returned to a full diet.

Krishna had studied economics. Joan was surprised—doubtless so to think that in all these years he had never told her and she had never inquired. She'd assumed his M.A. to have been cultivated nearer the slopes of Parnassus.

"Ah," *Ma* said, "but what profit to have gone abroad for art? Kishtu was always good at mathematics and his father said he should take up a Western study. But his heart wasn't in it. And today he says he knows nothing well—neither West nor East." *Ma* told of the bride they had found, a matriculate and winner of seven essay competitions—so suitable for someone who was going to be a Professor. But then Krishna had thrown up his job

and decided that he would never marry. That was in his Eastern phase. Things changed again of course.

*Ma's* small, shrewd eyes suddenly twinkled on her companion, "And now it is too late for his poor old mother to help him."

Joan looked up in amusement and alarm: "You don't mean to say that the old booby actually wants to marry?"

But once more *Ma* was as solemn as a mountain peak. She had closed her eyes and made a long, firm line of her lips. "Danger. You have been warned."

Yet *Ma* the monolith, *Ma* the embodiment of austerity and will-power, *Ma* the earth goddess, and the public monument—all these were but a massive outline enclosing something different. The real *Ma* was full of light and laughter. She said to Joan: "Hark at all the birds singing with the sinking sun. In the summer they lie on the ground and try to scratch earth over themselves. Then they do not want to live. But in the autumn they are happy. So happy that they have no need of scriptures." And next morning she called out from the kitchen: "Tonight you must watch the water-lilies, Miss Joan. They open at sunset on the pond behind the bathing tank. I have had the pond specially cleared of weed this year so that they can open freely. I call them lovers of moonlight because they lie in wait for the dark."

*Ma* loved the gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon and was full of their legends and their pranks. "Soon it will be the full moon of the month of *Kartik*," she said. "Then father will have to stay at home. For if the head of the house sees the full moon of *Kartik* means bad luck. Lakshmi the Goddess of Fortune might be offended. You see full moon at *Kartik* is the Orchard Festival, too. And that means the village lads have the right to break into gardens and carry off the ripe fruit. I suppose Lakshmi stops father from looking out of the window so that he shouldn't spoil their fun. Lakshmi was always so fond of children."

Covered with this complex pattern of symbols the

world, for *Ma*, took on the character of a children's game. Mystics and saints who tried to escape from the game, were she thought, a trifle foolish. For who would not rather taste sugar than be it? The ineffable, the absolute, the all-but-unknowable Godhead was thoroughly enjoying himself. What a rare treat that we should have the chance—however briefly—to join in.

Ram *Babu*, Krishna's father, was tall and wispy with a scraggy neck and a beaked face. When he talked his Adam's apple bobbed like a float in a high wind and he peered down at his companion as if surprised at the great distance between them. To see him standing next to his wife, who was shaped like a steam pudding, was to sense Krishna materialising in their midst. Krishna was intermediate in height. He was as thin as his father, but his paunch was now no longer surprising. Besides, each of his other features was a blend of the two parental extremes. In temperament he clearly related his father's reserve and interest in ideas to his mother's intuitive attraction for people. Only the two will-powers—applied by each parent to such different ends—seemed to have cancelled each other out.

Ram *Babu* treated his visitor with formality. This was due partly to natural shyness and partly to the fact that this was the way he believed Europeans ought to be treated. As a high-grade civil servant he had once had frequent dealings with them and it had been a source of pride to him to keep these contacts as distant and correct as possible, to refrain entirely from the servility, the heartiness or the impertinence shown by so many of his colleagues. In his retirement, Ram *Babu* was working on a study of comparative theology—neo-Platonism and the Upanishads. His face when temporarily deprived of books, wore the voluntary smile of someone resigned to boredom.

Kolyani's father—who turned out to be a cousin and not a brother of Ram *Babu's*—was more friendly but also more ambiguous. Next in seniority to Ram *Babu*, he

looked remarkably young, his hair but slightly grizzled. He was dark and handsome with a muscular body which he preserved each morning by strenuous *yoga* exercises. He was obviously proud of his appearance and in spite of the cool weather wore no more than a singlet and *dhoti* tucked high round his waist in order to show off his oiled and rippling physique. He was deferential to Krishna's parents, but with Joan he deployed a fluent command of English dwelling on such words as "didactic" and "peregrination" with a disdainful smile curling his thick and sensual lips. Joan was puzzled. She sensed a note of hesitation in the family when Dilip *Babu's* name was mentioned. She never saw Kolyani in his company.

In fact she scarcely saw Kolyani at all, nor had she made much effort to see her. From the beginning she had had little faith in the commission that Krishna had laid on her. Kolyani was another lost cause—a loss made all the more certain by the unfamiliar surroundings in which Joan was expected to operate. Normally this would have worried her. She would have stuck to Kolyani like a terrier, pulling her out of her bolt-hole. But now—

Once again Joan found herself wondering at the delicious vacuum in which, for three days, she had been suspended. This morning a letter had come from Hem *Babu*, the Vice-Chancellor, and the way it had arrived with the postman standing up on his bullock cart and clashing a pair of cymbals in triple time to attract attention—all this seemed far more interesting than the contents of the letter itself. Hem *Babu* wrote how glad he was that she was taking a few weeks' rest. She must be in no hurry to get back since Miss Blatterhorn—one of the two other European women on the University staff—would move temporarily into the hostel. Miss Blatterhorn was a lecturer in Oriental art, who talked about "the cosmic morphology of the Hindu sculpture." She sported an amber necklace made from a Buddhist rosary and had

a strong Berlin accent. Joan muttered "how ridiculous" and "how dare he interfere" as she read, but more because this was the part she expected herself to play than because she felt any real indignation. A minute or two later and she was lying back in the shadow again, the letter left open on her lap.

It was still there. She took it up and once more read it through. Of course she was wasting her time here. Of course she must go in a day or two.

In fact she would send a telegram from Dakpur this afternoon telling Hem *Babu* to cancel his arrangements with "The Blatterhorn." Meanwhile she must talk to Kolyani and make some notes on the new aspects of the joint family system which her brief stay had revealed to her. "The B.'s have adapted the old traditions to the demands of modern life. In the village they use the Sanscrit version of their name—Bandapadaya (? lotus lover) and in town the anglicised Bannerjee. They have abandoned the authoritarian type of family structure in favour of a co-operative type, which seems unusual. No single person has final authority. All have spheres of responsibility in different fields. A., the senior member, has retired and contributes his pension to the common fund, but otherwise seems to exercise no controlling hand. B. manages the estate. C. owns three shops in Dakpur. D., E., and F. work in Calcutta. All contribute a specified percentage to the family exchequer, while maintaining their own separate establishments within the interlinked courtyards. This common pool is used as a kind of family insurance. Anyone, whether earning or not, young or old, has an equal right to make claims on it. Every claim is considered by the senior members of the family in consultation. About orthodox caste restrictions the family is equally ambivalent. Only the women seem to observe them, *Ma*, the wife of the senior member, being particularly severe. She fasts at *Ekdasi* (the eleventh day of the moon), carries oblations morning and evening to the *tulsi* plant in the back courtyard, has told

me that she has never taken food from anyone who was not of the same caste of Brahmins as herself and that, although she gets the greatest possible pleasure in preparing food for her various guests, she would not ever consider sitting down with me to share my meal. What reason she has for following these extraordinary customs and what satisfaction she gets from them (and she is certainly a most integrated and tolerant person) is obscure—”

But this was not the only space in her imaginary report that Joan was forced to leave blank. An image floated into her mind and stayed there. *Ma* slicing vegetables in the quiet shadow of her kitchen, her bare feet grasping the slicer which had a blade curving upwards at the end like the prow of a Viking ship, *Manon Lescaut* open face downwards on the stone floor. Perhaps this was the throne-room from which the rest of the rambling old house was held in thrall. The idea disturbed Joan. How could the powerless wield power? It was against common sense. Altogether too mystical for her file on “Family Structure.” She suppressed the image.

Slap—slap—slap someone else was coming from their bath. Moving slowly, hesitantly like all the others here. No wonder I feel so sleepy.

The wet feet drew nearer, hesitated then turned slowly back down the veranda. Joan sat up.

“Kolyani !”

“I’m sorry. I’m afraid I’ve woken you.”

“My dear, I wish you would. Please throw something at me whenever you see my eyes close. I’ve been in a shocking drowse since the moment we arrived.”

“Good.”

“No, not good. I think you must be putting opium in my food. Come on—sit down and have a chat.”

Kolyani drew back. “Not now, Joan. I have to help with the lunch. But I thought of going to see *Baba* this afternoon—”

“Baba ?”

"*Baba* Sivananda. He's really our family *guru*. Our teacher. He knows us all. I wondered if you would come."

"Where does he live?"

"He has his centre about 20 miles away. We have to take a bus from Dakpur."

"An *Ashram*—oh, my dear, I'm afraid I'm hopelessly unspiritual."

"But it's quite comfortable."

"I'm sure it is. I wasn't really thinking of that. I was just wondering if I'd fit."

"But there are usually several Westerners there. *Baba's* even got a new American disciple." Joan made a grimace and was quickly sorry for it, seeing Kolyani's look of misery. "*Dada* wanted me to take you, Joan—"

"Well of course—if it's doctor's orders. How long do you intend staying?"

"Not long. Two or three days. That's all."

"Two or three days? But I have to go back on Sunday. Term starts next week, you know."

"But *Dada's* coming then—"

"I know. I expect we'll overlap by a few minutes." Kolyani thinks I'm seriously ill—one can see that by the way she looks at me. It really is too ridiculous of Krishna to have built up this elaborate subterfuge for a cause that he must know to be sunk beyond all hope.

Sitting up, Joan started brusquely tidying her hair.

## 2.

They arrived in Dakpur by bullock cart in time for the afternoon bus—but found that it was the morning bus that was on the point of leaving. "But when will the next one start?"

"Who knows? Sunset perhaps."

"But this is monstrous. You should stick to your schedule."

"We have to wait till we are full of passengers—otherwise it would not pay."



"You could leave the passengers for the afternoon bus."

"The afternoon bus is run by a different company."

"I insist on your finding us room."

"You can go on the roof, *Memsahib*. There is room there. If you sit at the front you will be out of the dust. But don't put your feet through the windscreen."

"Come on, Kolyani. I'll pull you up."

"No, *Didi*—it doesn't matter. I can stay. I can take the next bus."

"Don't be silly. I can't possibly go by myself."

"I'll send that telegram for you."

"Oh, don't worry about telegrams. Come on, I'm not going to have you make a martyr of yourself. At least not when you are with me."

Kolyani climbed on with great agility. This was the martyrdom—though she was too polite to show it. To travel like an uncouth peasant among bundles of bedding, tin trunks painted with sprays of roses, and baskets of green *pomola-nebu* the size of howitzer shells.

The *Ashram* was built in a forest of giant *banyans*, *bodhis*, and *pepuls*. Its three thousand disciples were housed in cottages made of woven bamboo strips, with open lattice windows and thatched roofs. Each cottage nestled in a small clearing of its own, under the shadow of the huge trees. There was only one brick building—the "Science College" and here Western visitors were lodged because of its boasted toilet facilities (a pump on a raised platform outside and, in each room, a Victorian commode set in a high-backed mahogany chair). The college's sole concession to science seemed to be an electric generator in the back-yard.

At first sight *Baba* (Grandfather) *Sivananda* was not impressive. He was an elderly wisp of muslin and unkempt beard, with a complexion of cold mutton and hair that looked as though he had just been roused from sleep. When Joan commented on this neglect, Kolyani explained that he would not allow himself to be photo-

graphed and that he had not looked in a mirror for more than twenty years.

*Baba* lived on a diet of curries and fruit juice, taken in quantities just about sufficient for a ten-month-old baby. On this diet he conducted an 18-hour day. He rose regularly at 3 a.m., prayed and meditated till seven and from then till nine at night, squatted in public on a canopied dais, dispensing wisdom. Two female attendants stood discreetly on either side, one holding an enormous slop pail—for *Baba* suffered from bronchitis now that the November mists had invaded the countryside—and the other a bamboo fan.

Disciples chafed the dais in a relentless stream, stooping to "take the dust" off the sandals of the Holy Mother displayed in front. When Joan and Kolyani came, *Baba* was dispensing to a district magistrate about to be prosecuted for "undermining the authority of the police" and to a seedy youth who, having settled for celibacy, had deliberately broken his leg so as to postpone the marriage which his parents had arranged for him. When he listened, *Baba* pumped his cheeks in and out. When he spoke he swayed rhythmically backwards and forwards, bolt, upright from the hips. He had a thin, reedy voice.

"He said to the magistrate: "Does that mean accepting bribes?"

"It is what I am accused of."

"And you are guiltless?"

"Of course."

*Baba* puffed his cheeks in and out in silence; then, "If you are guiltless you will leave the *Ashram*. We cannot help you. You can face the trial in the strength of your own spirit." But if you are guilty you may stay."

The magistrate buried his face in his hands and moaned: "I have done wrong."

To the second, *Baba* said: "Your was an act of cowardice, disguised under a noble name. That is never good. If you do not wish to marry and would like to take

up a life of renunciation here with us, then you should remember that renunciation is no refuge for the weak. It is a weapon for the strong."

Joan listened not sure whether to be amused or amazed. Her large lips were parted and her fierce brown eyes were darting restlessly from side to side of the audience who sat reverently beneath the dais. She was aching to interrupt, and yet was aware that she had nothing to say.

A few minutes later *Baba* turned to Kolyani. "So you left your husband, my child? And now? You will return? That is a great sacrifice. Some might say that such a person is not worthy of it. But you know better. You know that God alone can judge our worthiness—"

Joan could contain herself no longer. She gasped in protest, making a noise like a bunsen burner. *Baba* bent towards her, his air of meticulous good manners perfectly matching the Edwardian flavour of his English:

"And may I be allowed to ask what brings you among us, my friend?"

"I have come with Mrs. Das Gupta."

"That I know. I was interested in what had drawn you to India."

Joan decided to let fly: "Oh, there are probably lots of reasons—but I don't expect any of them will appeal very much to you. For instance, I'm not interested in *yoga* or the six stages of spiritual trance. In fact I'm altogether sceptical about Indian mysticism—"

*Baba* rocked backwards and forwards in excitement. "A rationalist—that, of course, I knew—"

"How?"

"Aha, not being one myself you can scarcely expect me to explain," and as he bent forward Joan noticed his eyes for the first time, green and ageless, they seemed to laugh at the mask of gravity imposed on the rest of his face. "When I saw you come in, I thought: 'We in India may need the help of rationalists. But the question is—what help can they possibly need from us?'"

"Perhaps doing what one believes to be right gives us all the help we need—"

"Perhaps," he twinkled back. "Yet altruism is rather thin gruel for most of us. Is it enough for you?"

"No," she heard herself saying: "But then I suppose my background has a lot to do with my being here. One of my aunts was a missionary. The wrong kind. She seemed to think that India belonged to the British by divine right. My aunts brought me up. I quarrelled with their stuffiness and all that it stood for. I suppose my final act of disobedience was to come out to India and do the things which they would have thought derogatory to the dignity of a *Memsahib*."

"So, you are moved by a feeling of justice. You have come to repay us for some of the mistakes you believe your compatriots to have made. Do I interpret you correctly?"

"I suppose you could think of it like that," Joan said with her twisted smile.

He looked at her disconcertingly. Was it imagination or did he wink? "Comfort, security, family, Western standards of living—you cannot renounce such things for the sake of justice, dear lady. Justice is too moderate, too reasonable, too impartial. Did not your own Greeks picture her as a blind Goddess? No, when you have paid a debt to justice the scales have a habit of tipping in the opposite direction. Love is blind, too—but for a different reason. Blind to everything except the beauty of the beloved."

He wants me to say "I love India"—or, at least, "I am part of India," she thought and she toyed for a moment with the words. The evening sun was sinking slowly behind the trees, the glade was heavily quilted with shadow. Just at that instant the words would have been true. If she did not love India, had she ever loved anything? Then the decision was taken out of her hands. A pimply Western youth, who was sitting on the far side

of the dais, broke into song. He had a nasal tenor voice and an American accent:

*"Did ye ever see a movin' pikcher like the sky?  
Chock-full of love an' movemēt—"*

He had clearly written the words himself and he delivered them in a wet whinny of ecstasy. The spell was broken. The calm beauty of the evening turned to a picture post-card.

At last Joan had an excuse to be rude, she said: "Saints talk very glibly about love."

"I'm not a saint," *Baba* replied, giving his shoulder an angry flick underneath its white shawl. "I'm a bulb, a battery, a current. If I make things clearer—then you are free to switch me on, like the *Ashram* lights are switched on at sunset. If not—then, who can prevent you from using your own torch?"

Joan smiled, stood up and turned to leave.

It was with grim satisfaction that she found the American disciple to inhabit the same veranda of the Science College as did she and Kolyani. He, at least, was not an electric light, but someone with whom she could argue and of whom she could disapprove. She waited her opportunity. In the evening she sat Kolyani out on the veranda and tried to convince her that *Baba's* doctrine of marriage was a vast conspiracy promoted by the stronger sex. Kolyani submitted in patience, holding the end of her *sari* over her mouth as she listened. Kolyani's wide, well-shaped eyes, seen separately from her silver hair and the queer, sad twist of her smile, still had a mischievous sparkle. And Joan could not help feeling that beneath the *sari* Kolyani was hiding laughter. She remembered once giving a lecture in Calcutta on Bentham's Theory of Value to a class which gazed at her with the same sceptical politeness. She discovered the reason afterwards. She had come to the wrong room. The class had been expecting to hear about the pre-Sanscritic language of the Rig-Veda.

"You listen too much to others, Kolyani. You should make up your mind for yourself."

"But *Baba* never tries to influence anyone," Kolyani said, taking the *sari* away from her mouth at last.

"Then what about *Ma*? She's a lovely person, of course, but—"

"I've never spoken to *Ma* about it—"

"You know what she wants you to do, though."

Kolyani thought for a moment: "I know what she would have done in my case."

"Well, there's your father. What does he say?"

"Ah—Father—"

Kolyani's voice sounded formal and far-away. Joan misinterpreted it. The battle-light leaped to her eyes. A first breach, she thought, in the smooth symmetry of Kolyani's defence. "Yes, I'm sure your father doesn't approve of what you're doing," she said. "He's much too modern."

Kolyani clamped her *sari* back across her mouth and turned away her eyes. "Father," she murmured, "he has so much to think about."

At that moment the American approached: "Come and tell us *your* view on marriage," Joan said to him like an examiner at a *viva*.

"Why I guess a man of superior calibre should always marry a woman of inferior impulses," and his watery blue eyes swam away from them like startled fishes. "That's what makes for spiritual happiness in marriage." He had a complaining sort of voice and a petulant expression on his face. His *dhoti* was creased and dirty.

Joan let him drip on for a few minutes. The West was the slave of its women. They had mixed dross in the golden ideals of Christendom. "Why," he moaned, "back home women have even degraded the sacred sacraments of sex. But thank God the women of India still believe in motherhood."

It was at this point that Joan plunged to attack, chin lunging carelessly right and left like a pugilist

mobbed by midgets. Word by word she pulled his ludicrous ideas to pieces. She poured scorn on those who affected to despise women because they secretly feared their own impotence ("The poor boy's one of these unacknowledged 'Queers'," she had decided as soon as she heard his arguments). She told him that he should get to know a few women before he passed judgment on them. At this the youth bridled and started to speak of "his wife." She, simple village maiden though she was, had already given him ample proof of the nobility of Indian womanhood. Joan must meet her tomorrow. And he retired a few yards off to meditate, his pimply face puckered in a mixture of piety and defiance. Insult ostentatiously ignored by Inner Calm.

Kolyani had been asleep for half an hour.

Joan glanced out at the *Ashram*. Storm lanterns glowed through the patterned lattice windows, hundreds of electric bulbs hung from the branches like festival lights. How neat and still and spare it all looked with the great trees breaking the regularity of it. Here and there a voice called, water splashed, a frying pan rasped over a charcoal fire; tiny sounds—like birds scratching on a window-pan. But Joan did not catch the beauty of it. She was wondering where the three thousand disciples found their funds.

That night the white frock which Joan had left out to dry on the flat, tarred roof of the Science College was torn to shreds by a playful monkey. In the morning she had to borrow one of Kolyani's *saris*. She disliked wearing a *sari*, it restricted her movements so—and she wound this one unusually high up her legs so as to make it plain that she had donned it out of necessity rather than choice. The American youth, intent on the painful and perilous task of her conversion, stuck to her like a limpet throughout the day and it was difficult to say which of the two looked more inept in their costume—Joan with her nervous, thrusting stride and air of masculine protest or he like a bell tent with

the canvas in tatters. The *Ashram*, peering through the trees, watched them mild-eyed and tolerant, too polite to laugh.

In the afternoon Joan was taken to meet his bride. He had married her only a few months before, he said, yet already he saw how sublime was her conception of self-sacrifice, and how pure her freedom from carnal desire. She was hidden in the depth of the Science College like a mother rabbit at the hub of the burrow.

Joan thought her plain and spiritless enough until, after a few minutes, the girl drew her stealthily aside.

"*Didi*, I want to ask you a favour. You know my husband so well—"

"No—I—"

"But you know him better than I do, *Didi*. You are European. Besides you are older." And then a note of passion crept into her glum voice. "Why does he wear a *dhoti*, *Didi*? When my parents arranged for me to marry a *sahib*, I thought he would always wear trousers and live in a city. But instead he wears a *dhoti* that is torn and stained. It is so bad, *Didi*. The neighbours will laugh. Please, *Didi*, ask him to wear long trousers. . . ."

So this was the spiritual mate that the poor idiot thought he had married! One hoped to escape from the East and the other from the West, and their paths had already crossed. Where was it she had read of the ornithologist whose pet peacock had fallen in love with a parlourmaid? How sad that it was so often the misfits who intermarried.

### 3.

Next day the bus back to Dakpur went by a different route. The dust track skirted an expanse of water that lapped placidly at the edge of the road. "Is it a lake?" Joan asked. Kolyani did not know.

"No it's not a lake, *Memsahib*," the driver said. "It's the river. It changed its course three years ago."



"And those islands? They look as if they were still inhabited."

"Oh, yes. They are. About one thousand people have been left living in the middle of the river."

"What do they do?"

"They used to be cultivators—but of course their fields are ruined now."

"Then how do they live?"

The driver gave a shrug and swerved to avoid a leopard.

The river was touched to silver by the lazy-fingered sun. To others it might speak of sloth, but to Joan it was a call to action. Was it the dazzle and shine of the water bouncing back at her that excited her so? Whatever it was she knew all of a sudden that Krishna's plan to bring her to Rampur was a drug, a seduction from duty. She ought never, not even out of politeness, to have yielded to it. Rampur was lovely, of course, but it was clearly not meant for her. There was so much waiting to be done in Calcutta. So much she could still do to save her drains. Yes, even that seemed possible as she stared at the shining menace of water sliding by. *Baba* had done at least one thing for her. He had made it plain that she must never rely on anyone but herself. She must switch on her own torch again.

## Two

THE SIGHT of Krishna lolling on her veranda at Rampur annoyed her. It was the pose—one long leg crossed negligently over the other, head flat on the floor, smoke from a cigarette spiralling slowly upwards and a brass bowl with *pan* a few inches from

his nose. Really, she thought, he looks like something out of an opium den. After all, what excuse has he for such amorphous laziness? No, she thought, I won't go on being tolerant, not now that I've seen his home and the fine, sharp characters of his parents.

"Accha, Joan—did you meet *Baba*?"

"Once."

"Argue with him?"

"Of course."

"Impressed?"

"Oh, yes—in a way. But I'm afraid I found the atmosphere pretty ghastly. I can't bear all that slipper-kissing and talking in whispers as if we were in church. There was an American boy there—pigeon chest and pimples. He really was the last word in bogus mysticism."

"*Baba's* kind to lunatics."

"He ought to send them home."

"Why, if they are harmless?"

"Well what are the rest of them doing in any case? I don't think even *Baba* has a right to look at his navel when there's so much work to be done—"

Krishna interrupted her with a sharp intake of breath, but it was some seconds before he spoke: "Well, if it's work you are after, you can hardly complain of *Baba*."

"Oh, I wouldn't call that work—"

"Thirty years, without intermission, bent to the service of others. And for fourteen hours out of every twenty-four. *Accha*, present company excepted, Joan, I doubt if there's anyone else in Bengal who could match such a record as that—"

Joan thought of Nogen cracking his finger joints and inscrutably nibbling biscuits. But the comparison was hardly appropriate—unless to show how in India everyone, whether active or lazy, went to extremes. She switched: "At least Gandhi would have had them all out helping with the floods—"

"The floods?"

"The floods we passed on our way back."

"Ah, yes, there are always floods."

"But don't always have to be—"

Pause. Krishna recrossed his legs. "So you'd have the *Ashramites* building dams and reservoirs and catchment basins?"

"Idiot! I was thinking of the people. Do you realise that there are still several thousand islanded out there on the water?"

"If you mean the place I think you do—"

"—Just south of Dakpur."

"Near where some of our property used to be?"

"I don't know—"

"Well, that's not a flood. The river changed its course—"

"A rose by any other name—"

"There has been talk of trying to resettle those people for years."

"Talk? Isn't it time you *did* something?"

He packed a *pan* into his cheek with an air of fastidious delicacy: "I doubt," he said, munching hard, "if even you could move a peasant from his homestead when he didn't want to go." Then he raised his head in alarm. "What are you doing?"

"Packing."

Krishna surfaced slowly and tucked his legs under him in the "lotus" pose. You never noticed his slight squint unless he looked you straight in the face. And he did that rarely. Yet turned on in moments of crisis or decision his eyes startled. They seemed to have crossed that very instant from sheer intensity of feeling. "But Joan, I've come down specially because I knew you were here."

No, she thought, having wasted the best part of a week on your behalf, I'm free now of all possible obligation. And she said: "You seem to forget that we both live in town."

"But I wanted to talk. In Calcutta you're always too busy to talk."

"Well, talk away. I haven't got much to pack."

Having made his effort, Krishna dissolved back horizontally across the floor. "Uppack again, Joan, the University's not expecting you." And he waved a deprecating hand.

"I'd meant to send a telegram."

"You'll stay a few more days."

She stood up. She was holding a pile of text-books that, during her brief holiday, she had never opened: "I'll stay another twenty-four hours on one condition."

"What's that?"

"You take me over the islands."

"The islands? What islands?"

"The forgotten islands on the fringe of your estate. The islands which apparently you know all about. The islands I passed this morning."

"We'll need more than twenty-four hours to find a boat."

"Send to the Dakpur Circle Officer this afternoon. He'll arrange it."

"It's Sunday."

"That'll make it all the more impressive."

Krishna closed his eyes and gave a comic whistling sigh through clenched teeth.

## 2.

In Kaligram, the largest of the island villages, Krishna, Joan, and the Circle Officer sat on the ground. On the highest knoll behind them was the Temple which gave its name to the village. All round was the same riotous profusion of nature as in Rampur—though lower down salt water had turned trees to sterile and blackened stumps—but here the profusion was menacing. Blossoms were still and waxen, creepers pendulous and obscene. Even the leaves of the trees, that shone as if with a coat of wet varnish, threatened in a restless sort of way.

This was the dark face of fertility. Animals had gone. Only birds and humans remained.

Here and there in the undergrowth was a crumbling mud cottage with a lid of withered palms laid across the top. But most had walls of battered petrol tins or rusting corrugated iron and roofs made from rotten sacks tied to overhanging trees. Only the Kali Temple, built of stone and raised on its eminence, had not yet been touched by the river. The Mother Goddess stared down at her havoc.

The humans were remote and dignified, bearing their hardships like a self-imposed penance. They did not pester the visitors with lamentation or complaint. Instead they invited them into their hovels and ordered the children to climb for green coconuts. Guests must refresh themselves. Guests are the envoys of God. When Joan began to question they were as silent and reserved as captured royalty.

"I hear the Government has offered you money."

"Yes, *Memsahib*, for rebuilding." It was Prem *Babu*, the headman of the village, who answered. He was round and elderly and placid, the embodiment, it seemed, of Kaligram's passive resistance to nature.

"Why won't you accept it?"

"They will not let us rebuild here."

Prem *Babu* flourished a hand at the sky and someone else chimed in: "They want us to build in the bed of the old river—where it is all stones and mud and no green thing can grow."

"But what can you do here? You have no means of livelihood."

"Mother Kali will look after us."

Joan made a slapdash attempt to translate: "God helps those who help themselves," and was not quite sure whether she had succeeded. When Prem *Babu* replied, "That is right, *Memsahib*. God will help those who love him" she presumed failure and decided to abandon theology.

"But what are you living on?" she asked instead. "Horses' eggs," says an old woman unexpectedly and there was a wriggle of laughter.

The Circle Officer went rapidly round the group pointing out those who worked on the mainland at road construction for 12 annas a day. The rest, the unemployed adults, received a dole of three pounds of rice a week. And the children? Oh, the children got nothing.

"But you can't stay on here. It's madness—"

No one replied. The villagers looked uneasy, like children who were being scolded.

"The river may change its course, *Memsahib*."

The Circle Officer grew excited and rolled his eyes: "And I tell them that the river will not change its course for another hundred years."

Prem Babu looked up. "This is the village where they were born, *Memsahib*. It is their village. They would like to stay here." He spoke softly and with a secretive smile.

The Circle Officer jumped up and down. He was a Madrasi and his English was heavily accented. "They are hopeless this pipples—hopeless. Nothing will move them, Miss Raydon. We have tried everything to move them. I had written fifty letters on their behalf. But it is hopeless." He was a fat little man, his belly fitting his khaki trousers as tight as an egg in an egg cup. He wore a *topi*, that was three sizes too large, but it did not engulf his face because flap ears acted as a breakwater. On his plump, dark flesh the creases showed like smudges of charcoal. At first Joan had thought him ridiculous. But now she liked him. There was at least something human about indignation.

Krishna sat apart on a fallen tree trunk. He was looking askance over the river with an expression at once beatific and quizzical. He had relished the milk of three green coconuts. But Joan and the Circle Officer had put theirs briskly to one side, untouched.

Joan drove on grimly from village to village. The

Circle Officer muttered: "It is no use, Miss Raydon. No use, absolutely." Krishna gazed cross-eyed at the horizon and trailed a leaf in the water at the side of the boat.

Tulsigram, Ragpur, Pipha, Bagmari—on each of the islands the conditions were more appalling than on the one before. Kaligram by comparison seemed a rumour of wealth and privilege. In Tulsigram the last rains had driven fifty people on to a mud platform about 60 feet square. On Bagmari there was no fresh water and the children had the stiff, electric hair of savages. They gaped at the visitors with glittering feverish eyes and grasped the fish they had just caught as if they expected them to be snatched away. Their parents watched from behind trees. When Joan beckoned them for questioning, they glanced stealthily from side to side in the hope that she was summoning someone else. The forest was afraid of men.

But Joan was relentless. Page after page of her black book was covered with facts and figures—number of inhabitants, castes, occupations, food, what shelter remained. She muttered "monstrous," "something must be done" at every fresh revelation of horror. And the villagers, hearing her, imagined that she was invoking the aid of a potent alien deity.

The tide was slipping out and they had to slither across an acre of gleaming mud. The Circle Officer headed to the east, but the boatmen waved him back. "We can't go that way, *Babu*. We are cut off. The tide is ebbing too fast."

"You never told us."

"But you never asked, *Babu*," the senior boatman said and his quiet tone implied "surely any idiot ought to know about tides." The evening sun was a red sore festering behind them in the flank of the sky. Krishna said: "Aha, looks as though you'll miss your train, Joan," and there was a note of complacency in his voice. "Another night of rural idleness after all—"

The Circle Officer was furious. He took off his *topi* and

banged it on the side of the boat as if trying to empty it of all possible bees.

"Please keep still, *Babu Moshae*, otherwise you will overturn the boat." b

The Circle Officer reluctantly replaced his *topi*.

They beached the boat half a mile from the nearest dry land, and started floundering single file across the mud. It was dark already and the ground mist reduced visibility to a few yards. The boatmen swung lightly along in front, carrying the upturned craft on their heads. Next came Joan and the Circle Officer sinking knee-deep at every step, kept going by will-power. Krishna behind them was soon lost in the mist.

The boatmen were singing:

*"Why send me forth in a broken boat  
When storm-clouds gather in the sky?"*

The song had a lilt at once sweet and melancholy. In the mist it also served as a useful guide to show how far ahead they were of their clumsy passengers. Every few minutes Joan called to them and they stopped and waited patiently till she caught up.

At last, sweating and caked with mud, they reached the ridge of the dyke. They were clear of the mist here and could see the moon rising above metallic palms. To the north mud gleamed like molten pewter.

Where was Krishna?

They called back across the flats. Plop—a bird landed on the mud. But otherwise a scathing silence. Joan's voice rang sharply. How like Krishna to let himself sink without protest. So inconsiderate to others.

A figure rose slowly from the grass in front.

"Good Heavens—then you are here already?"

"I found a cal-seway. I shouted but you probably thought I was a stork." They walked back along the narrow ridge to the Circle Officer's jeep. Krishna said: "Two boatmen easy and rhythmical but loaded with a



large rowing boat. Three educated citizens carrying nothing and stumbling awkwardly behind them. There's a moral in that—"

"They're used to mud."

"Yet we assume the right to tell them how to live in it."

Joan was on edge. In a moment she was accusing him of callousness.

"*Accha*—but not callous, Joan. Merely I wonder whether the people on the islands are quite as unhappy as you think they ought to be—"

If not callous, then worse—intellectually dishonest. For after all indifference was a matter of temperament, dishonesty the result of shabby thinking. Thought was free: temperament, what we were born with. I'm afraid your bottleneck of high principles seems to me just an excuse for laziness. To combine science with serenity, plumbing with patience, hygiene with happiness—your dream you once called it. And it certainly is a dream. I see that now. If you'd only admit you were lazy and didn't give the fact high-sounding names, then I wouldn't quarrel. And she thought—this week at Rampur has done one thing for me. I no longer labour under a dim haze of obligation. I can tell him all the things I've thought for years without it being rude or ungrateful to do so. So she said out loud: "You see, it's no use, Krishna. Now I know what happens while you dream—labourers once employed on your own estate die of starvation."

"*Acchā*, Joan—but it's not my estate. Dilip *Babu's* in charge of the estate—"

"Then you should speak to Dilip *Babu*."

"Ah, Dilip *Babu*—"

"What's wrong with Dilip *Babu*?"

Pause: "Dilip *Babu's* on the District Board. It's they who have been handling the Government grant."

"Then the District Board must be made to change their attitude."

"Perhaps it's not their fault. Perhaps it's a question of Government policy."

"Then someone must go and see the Government."

"But what other policy could you suggest?"

"At the moment I haven't the faintest idea." But her mind was at work and it wasn't long before ideas coagulated: "Gandhi," she said, "would have set them weaving—"

"And you'd have them do the same?"

"That remains to be seen. But the old boy spoke more sense about cottage industries than I'd realised. At least as a temporary measure."

"You must talk to Dilip Babu."

"I'm not coming back to Rampur."

"And the last train's gone. So where will you spend the night?"

"Anywhere. I've left my bag at the station. There's a waiting-room. I must get the milk-train back to town."

"But listen, Joan—listen. It's a big job—you can't plunge into it like this."

"I shan't rest until I've done something."

"But what about the hostel—your other work?"

"That's why I must hurry. I've only got a few days free."

"Then forget about the new term. Come back home and quietly gather the facts—"

"Oh, the facts—I can get hold of those soon enough—" and there and then she leaned forward to the front seat of the jeep and arranged to see the Circle Officer's files.

I'm driving a wedge between us she thought, as she smiled triumphantly back at Krishna; declaring war. But it's inevitable. Some day I had to refute the view of India to which he has tried to convert me.

### 3.

Dakpur station resembled a battlefield at sunset, strewn like corpses across the platform sleeping peasants awaited the early morning train.

Krishna stood at the barrier. It was 11/15.

"What on earth? Don't say you've been here all this time?"

"Have you had any food?"

"Dear, dear Krishna—can't you stop worrying about me?"

"I've ordered fried eggs and oranges," he said and he nodded to the white-tunicked station waiter, standing by. The waiter smartly clicked his bare heels and saluted. He had vague memories of a State visit from the Governor's lady. Everybody in Dakpur had turned into policemen then. It had been a long time ago. When he was a little boy. Perhaps this was the Governor's daughter.

"I don't want supper. You know I never eat as late as this."

"When you've eaten, we can go home. I've reserved Dakpur's one and only taxi."

"Now don't let's start that ALL OVER AGAIN," she said and before he could reply she had dived through bead curtains into the ladies' waiting-room. She poked her head through the beads.

"Look," she said, "I adore railway stations. They are the one quiet spot in the whole of India—"

"But there's no accommodation in there—"

"On the contrary. There's a bench that is at least nine inches wide with no more than five children on it."

Krishna was unused to Joan being humorous about herself. He thought: it must be because she's excited. Because she's on to a new project and the fatal moment of facing the truth about India can be postponed.

"Dear Krishna, don't look so cross. I know you think I'm mad. But it's not your fault. It isn't a sudden onset. We just haven't been honest enough to admit it before that's all." As she looked at him Joan's large brown eyes danced from point to point of his face and her full, broad lips quivered. Why was it that he still preferred the strong lines round her mouth and nose, the grooves

on her forehead—her whole expression of lean vitality in fact—to the smooth, untroubled skin admired by his countrymen?

She's patronising me, he thought. But I suppose I knew it would come.

Krishna lit a cigarette and stumped stubbornly up and down the thin lip of concrete protruding beyond the angle of limbs. The eggs came and immediately returned—untouched. Krishna paid for them and ordered a refill of *pan*.

A cow settled herself comfortably on the level crossing.

Krishna stood at the tip of the platform, eyes closed, his breath subdued to a gentle, rocking motion. The age-old, Indian recipe for peace which he had taught himself in order to dissolve moments of anxiety and distress.

The landscape, with all its listening trees and silver-needled fields, rose beneath the skin of his eyelids. At first it simply swayed outside like a back-cloth. And then—as when he lay awake while dawn was breaking in childhood—it became more and more *palpable*, until gradually he seemed to extend himself into it cautiously feeling his way. He swayed slowly backwards and forwards, like the cradle that hung from the beams at home.

The waiter padded up behind him with an envelope of *pan*. Stopped in awe and left the *pan* on top of a milk 'churn'. The lid was ajar. The *pan* fell in. Next morning's milk had a purple stain. Calcutta's Grand Hotel complained to the Public Prosecutor. The case took eighteen months, and provoked a leader in the NATION.

And now I *am* the landscape. I am the quick and the dead. I am loosed along quivering lines of space. Any sense of being myself—Krishna Gopal Bannerjee, ugly, stringy, short-sighted—all that is gone. Or has at least no more than a half life. ~~hence the visible Krishna~~. You see? It's only with an effort that I can put any sense of myself into even that single word. And before

the word is completed I reject the idea of it at the very root—

I can hear the breeze in the palms. It is the Mother's hair streaming upwards into space. Her breath is the roll of surf on distant shores. Birds are her mindless messengers and the jackal her wild lament for hunger. For what is the whole world but a nomad-land in which she has pitched her tent? We need not turn away in horror. The world is fit for her. It need not enslave us. She passes beyond it into infinity. She has hidden herself in the jungle for us to find her. And in our hands is the sword of good and evil so that we can fight our way through. Good is that which unites us to her—joy, compassion, selflessness. Evil that which divides. They are the two poles on which creation rests. And we are human and have the gift of choice. So let us leave our caves and our mountains! Let us wrestle again in the all-too-human dust from which we once shook ourselves free! Make India not merely a land of visionaries, but a land fit to receive their vision.

Krishna blinked, shook himself, and turned abruptly round. The old dream, he thought. The dream of union. Yet stronger, yes, perhaps even stronger than before. Then it has some permanent validity after all? Dream and personality. With dream the one single strand, to have run clearly through the skein.

He parted the bead curtains. Inside a tremulous snoring and the whisper of a sleeping child. Joan twisted on the narrow bench with a satisfied smile on her face. You see? I can sleep even here when duty demands it.

So this is what happens, he thought, when you try and change people. They react like themselves—only more so. Before, she was perhaps only up to her waist in her own destiny. Now she had plunged to the neck.

And suddenly he wanted to pray. Petitionary prayer such as women and peasants and Christians used. It was something that he had never done.

Oh, Mother, save her from crowning.

# Three

ON HER office desk there was a large suitcase of Miss Blatterhorn's. Strapped to the top was a green sun-shade stamped with a pattern of dancing Shivas. No doubt the stamp had been made by one of her art students or, even, by Miss Blatterhorn herself. Miss Blatterhorn's idealism had a Teutonic thoroughness. She invested the smallest of her possessions with a numinous halo. The trouble was that she expected others to admire the number, too. Love me, love my sun-shade.

Joan gave the suitcase a cursory glance. The enemy was moving in. Let him. She had a time-bomb which she could set off when it suited her. But just at the moment she had other things to think about. She had spent eight hours in Government departments passionately pleading for the islands.

Joan, of course, thrived on work which required impatient persistence. That was why, on a school outing, she had once won a prize in the Hampton Court Maze with ten minutes to spare. Why she was always making statistics, tabular surveys, and graphs—even of facts which to the outsider might have appeared sufficiently obvious without them.

Calcutta's Government Offices, once built to house the Government of the whole of India, now presided over no more than the Province of Bengal—and that reduced to a third of its former glory. One might, therefore, have expected them to be as deserted as the Forbidden City of Peking after the flight of the Manchus. But not a bit of it—every desk was loaded and a century of office files cluttered the floor space. The corridors were thronged with petitioners and peons. The peons wore khaki drill tunics and a red turban and sash. Some carried messages, some opened doors, some merely admired how the world was made.

Under a convoy of peons Joan was sent from Mr. Dhar to Mr. Nicholson, from Mr. Nicholson to Mr. Mukherjee, from Mr. Mukherjee to Mr. Sen—in fact she saw the inside of twelve different offices in the course of the day. Was it a record? Someone she met in the corridor had been waiting three months to get into his first. She played each skilfully off against the other. Not “Mr. Dhar wants to know whether there *are* precedents for giving flood relief grants for the purposes of setting up a new industry” but “Mr. Dhar wants to know *the details* of flood relief grants already given for setting them up.” And if Mr. Dhar proved obtuse, she threatened to ring up her uncle who, she said, would immediately contact the Prime Minister himself—for had not Sir Fleetwood campaigned for the P.M.’s release from prison during the last decade of British rule and had he not once entertained him at a sherry party? ~~What~~ Mr. Sen she had even picked up the receiver till the cowering Assistant Officer for the Promotion of Hand Textiles begged her to desist.

In such matters Joan had long thrown off her Sussex background. She was as pig-headed as an immigrant. She did not trust vague promises of good will, but demanded action at an agreed and appointed time and then trained every gun on her objective until she got it. She had, she knew failed to make a sufficient assault on bureaucracy for her “drains” project. She was not going to repeat the mistake. The result was that an official from the Relief and Rehabilitation Department, an expert from the Cottage Industry Board and a specialist in Flood Control were to visit the island in company with herself and the Circle Officer on Thursday afternoon.

“I shan’t be back for a day or two,” she told Miss Blatterhorn.

“There’s no need to be back. You will take ze holiday ass long ass you want it. You are so tired,” said Miss Blatterhorn, who was poor, and glad of the extra stipend.

"But I want to come back. I'm not taking a holiday." The unnecessary sharpness of Joan's voice perhaps implied that she did not want to come back but that she herself had not yet admitted the fact. "The Blatterhorn" gave a Higher Life smile.

## 2.

On paper Joan's plan seemed simple enough. Part one concerned flood precautions. She had persuaded the Government officials that a catchment basin should be built on the pebbly bed of the old river. Then if the river rose above a certain level during the rains those on the islands would be safe from further flooding. The Government's present proposal had been to build up the banks of the existing river. This was expensive and would mean, also, that the islands would be submerged when there was a heavy monsoon. Part two of Joan's plan concerned livelihood. All the Government's house-building grant should be switched to the foundation of a home industry from which the villagers could support themselves. This should be run on a co-operative basis.

Kaligram received The Plan in a discouraging silence. When asked what industry they would like to start they shook their heads and sighed. Joan expatiated on the virtues of weaving. The need of cloth throughout the country, the new decree subsidising hand-woven material by five annas in the rupee, the suitability of weaving as a family occupation since each member could participate.

"But we have no weaving caste here on the islands, *Memsahib*."

"Then you will have to learn."

A murmur ran round the crowd: "*Memsahib* will teach us to weave." It was an incredulous and slightly puzzled murmur.

"No, no, I can't teach you. We will have to find someone else to teach you. Perhaps some of you could be sent away to learn."



This time there was a murmur of dismay. "We will be sent away." And an elderly peasant got up very formally from the back, as if proposing a resolution: "We would rather that the *Memsahib* taught us. We would rather the factory was in her hands."

Joan turned to the Headman: "Prem Babu, can you call a meeting of the islands and explain what is needed? Can you give your answer to the Circle Officer in the next few days? If the Government is to help you in this way they must have an organisation to which they can make the grant."

Sitting behind her on a table (Kaligram did not boast any chairs) the Government looked at its watch with an expression that plainly showed it had always thought the scheme to be crazy. Prem Babu nodded and smiled.

"It is difficult, you see, *Memsahib*. Your ideas are so new." Then he joined the palms of his hands and his smile grew more secretive than ever: "Of course if the *Memsahib* could come herself to help our understandings—"

Joan did not realise the purely formal nature of the request, nor the fact that she was expected to refuse it. She just had time to think "yes, I suppose I knew it would come to this" before she said: "All right. I shall come here for a few days. We will discuss it together then. Don't worry about food. I will bring everything I need." Nothing, she thought, ever gets done without personal supervision.

At this the crowd drew nearer. Those who had been chatting fitfully on the edge, turned and stared. The silence stiffened.

Joan returned next evening with three days' supply of tinned vegetables, cheese, and dried eggs, as well as a primus, a water purifier, and a tent. This last was unnecessary. For during the twenty-four hours the villagers had reconditioned an old cowshed and given it

walls of *chach*—bamboo matting woven in patterns. Joan protested. She was coming for no more than three days and yet they had built her the village's first new house, while for three whole years they themselves had been living in ruins. Some needy family must have the place. Or perhaps they could set up their co-operative office in it. She herself would live in the tent she had brought.

"No, *Memsahib*, the office can be in the tent. Look we have already hung mango leaves along the veranda. That is to bring you good luck."

Joan did not want courtesy or compliments. How she had rated the class that had sat through her lecture on Bentham without telling her she had come to the wrong room! You should have the courage to be rude she had said. Now she looked at the villagers of Kaligram: "I'm not important," she told them, severely wagging her chin. "We must work *together*—that is the important thing." The villagers nodded sagely and edged her on to the veranda.

The *chach* had a strip of window all the way round it, like the gap between two sections of woven cloth when the weft is missed out. This open window was an open invitation. Joan's arrival was the first diversion the village had known for three years. Once imprisoned inside her hut she formed a one-man circus with every seat at the ringside. She opened a tin of cheese, unlocked her typewriter. Fifty pairs of eyes watched with fascination and whispered in wonder as to what the strange objects could be. Perhaps something to do with the weaving she wanted to start. The cheese a weight for hanging on the end of the warp; the typewriter a device for winning bobbins—

The ribbon of daylight being blocked by spectators, Joan marched out on to the veranda to unpack her goods. Hopeless, she thought, to do anything much this evening. Too late, too unorganised. So she might as well waste it trying to make friends. Resignation gave her a temporary taste of tranquillity. She even allowed them to

experiment with her fountain pen in one of the black note-books that Thacker and Spink had specially to make up for her since she liked a size not normally on the market. And the peasants handled everything from flit-gun to brassière with a cheerful reverence entirely lacking in envy.

Soon they were calling her "*Ma*" instead of "*Memsahib*." She wondered what she had done to deserve such trust. Her own anxiety about her possessions—"the tools of her trade" as she called them—seemed suddenly ludicrous. And then she thought—but it's not important that I should worry what they think of me. There isn't time for that. And as the moon rose she sat them round in a circle and talked about Responsibility and Co-operation. The Plan, she thought, they must understand The Plan—that is the only thing that matters.

But The Plan made little headway. Next morning the still sky, the silent thickets where the waxy *mahua* petals fell and fermented in the sunlight, the dark image of Kali striding through her archway on top of the hill, all this made Joan uneasy. The apathy of the islands seemed to carry a sinister undertone. Surely something *must* be happening? Something secret which she could neither see nor understand?

But whatever it was it had nothing to do with The Plan. No young men volunteered to go on a course to learn weaving. The first public meeting was inconclusive. Two of the outlying islands failed to send representatives, as they were alarmed by a rumour that Joan was a niece of the Queen's and had come to lure their children on to the mainland where she would have them forcibly baptised. Prem Babu grew politer and vaguer every day. But of what use was the friendliness of the villagers if they were incapable of using the new chance she had given them? The three days passed and with them Joan's hope of any new industry being set up before the monsoon. Her temper was not improving.

It was an elderly widow who came to the rescue.

She was tiny and shrivelled with a shaved head and breasts that hung like withered pears from a bent stick. The only name she was known by was Norener-*Ma*—Noren's Mother—although Noren had been dead for many decades. She came on Joan's second day. "*Ma* left this up by the pump," she said, nervously proffering something. It was a sliver of soap about the size of a dried walnut, Joan had discarded it thinking it could yield no more lather. She was just going to say that she did not want it, when Norener-*Ma* went on: "It is dangerous for Mother to leave her soap up by the pump. It is the only soap in Kaligram." So Joan took the walnut as reverently as it was offered.

Next day Norener-*Ma* brought her two wild hen's eggs for lunch and when Joan tried to refuse them the old woman fell at her feet in a dramatic gesture of obeisance. She wanted to cook for Joan. She was a Brahmin and had once kept a good kitchen. Joan assumed that the poor old thing hoped to share some of the contents of the larder brought from Calcutta. But not a bit of it. Norener-*Ma*, as an orthodox widow, would only eat food not touched by others. Her diet was restricted to unhusked rice and fruit.

She brought in new delicacies daily all of which she would not allow herself to eat. On the fourth day she hobbled on to the veranda carrying something wrapped loosely in an old rag. A large fish slipped out and started to squirm within a few inches of Joan's pile of papers. "*Ilisa mach*—trout"—cried the old woman pointing triumphantly. "I caught it for you, Mother, by hand. I have tried every day. But this is the first time I have succeeded." Norener-*Ma* was poor even for Kaligram. Between her and starvation were two soiled widow's *saris* and three pounds of unhusked government rice. At the market across the river she could have sold her catch for three rupees. Yet she had laid it at the feet of this sharp, nervous, inexplicable woman whom she had chosen to serve.

But it was not this which struck Joan. Instead she jumped up, striking her forehead and calling out: "Fish—fish—fish—!"

Norener-Ma looked anxious: "*Ilsa* is a very fine fish, Mother—"

"But is there much fish in the river?"

"The *old* river, Mother. That was always very rich—"

"And the folk at Bagmari—don't they belong to the fishing caste?"

"The Bagdis? Aye, Mother, they used to fish before the time of the great tempest. Then they had to sell their boats and their nets. And now they must fish with their bare hands alone—"

FISH. That was it. The magic word that spelled prosperity. The untapped source of wealth. Weaving had never fired Joan's imagination. It had not flashed on her in a visionary trance. But now she already saw the river speckled with tiny sailing boats and nets heavy with the glittering catch. She heard the islands echo with the hammers of boatbuilders and she looked towards the north bank and lo, there were twin garages from which lorries would take the morning's haul fresh to the markets of Calcutta. The Kaligram Fishing Co-operative—that of course was the answer. A sounder market, a skill already known in the islands—why on earth hadn't she thought of it before?

### 3.

An official from the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries pronounced that there were one and five eighth's seer of edible fish per cubic yard of water. He suggested the construction of a simple barrage at each end of the fishing ground to prevent the larger fish from escaping. He passed a minute to the department concerned with fish breeding. Joan worked out a scheme. The Government grant of 40,000 rupees should be distributed as follows: half towards the capital expenditure

of the co-operative, the other half in the form of bonds to all those who decided to stay on the islands. These bonds would be invested as shares and every family would receive an equal number of them. They would thus obtain an equal and basic income from the co-operative when it was functioning—whether they worked for it or not—while the rest of the profit would go towards the wages of the co-operative workers.

Prem Babu objected—which means that he smiled more persistently than ever, stroked his fat ankles and said he didn't quite understand. He looked just like Gan Babu's father—Joan thought—that old fuddy-duddy who used to sit out on a chair in Sen Street. And this finally clinched in her mind the fact that he should not be taken seriously. For one thing she had discovered that he was not the monument of passive resignation to the will of God which she had thought him to be at first. He was merely an extremely devious old gentleman to whom the disastrous floods had given a twisted opportunity for power. He had never lived in Kaligram. He simply possessed a small house there. His interest in the village dated from the time of the floods, when, as all the other middle-class inhabitants fled, he himself had moved in, smiling beatifically and bringing his own rations.

His ascendancy over the village was due to the fact that the villagers thought him to have abandoned a life of comfort and repose in order to give them succour. They were ready to worship anyone who offered them the slightest pretext so desperate were they for re-assurance. But in fact Prem Babu had done little for the villages beyond advising them not to move. He himself moved regularly on "urgent business." Business that became particularly urgent during the rains and the summer heat.

"We must create a Management Committee, Prem Babu, to whom the grant money can be made over. Then the project can get under way."

Prem Babu made a gesture of bewilderment and

propitiation : But *Memsahib*, how can I be the chairman unless I know who is going to serve on my committee ? ”

When Joan approached the prospective committee members, they looked uneasy and alarmed. How could they serve unless they were certain Prem *Babu* would be in the chair ?

#### 4.

Joan took matters into her own hands. Made a last effort. She called a meeting herself and she visited each island urging them to attend it. She was more agile now at negotiating the mud. At Bagmari her bare legs were encased in black, shiny boots to the calf, but her dress was clean. The lean-faced, wild-eyed women came out bearing coconut shells full of precious sweet water to wash their visitor's feet. They were no longer afraid.

“Mother, you must come to see us often.”

“I may have to leave.”

“But Mother, you must stay. Who will save us if you do not stay ? ”

And they crowded round, eagerly fingering her dress, her hair, her Gladstone bag.

The night of the meeting was sharp and misty. A few lamps made from hollow coconuts were packed in the haze like fruit in cotton wool. To keep themselves from the December chill the islanders had wrapped paper, sacking, strips of blanket round their heads and stood with only their gaunt legs sticking like knitting needles out of tattered bundles of rags. They fixed Joan with a gaze that was half vigil, half trance. A gaze of passionate anonymity. How can we propitiate this strange and fiery figure with the funny accent and the larking voice of a man ? Look how she stabs her hands from side to side as she talks, like a chicken aimlessly jerking its head. But perhaps she could love us. Perhaps she is gentler than she seems. Perhaps if we worship her she will agree to stay—

Joan was telling them that she would go away. They

had not formed their committee. They had taken no steps to save themselves.

"But *you* must save us, Mother. Only you can do it. Stay, Mother—stay and save us."

"Don't be absurd," Joan said, "How can *I* save you? You have to learn to save yourselves. You must choose your committee on your own. To show you what I mean, I shall go away for a week. And while I am gone you must get to work. I'll leave my tent and my few belongings here on the island, to show you that I intend to come back. But if after seven days you have not chosen your committee, then I will go away for good."

For a moment after she had spoken, the stunned, blank gaze of the onlookers did not alter. Then a rumour started. Mother is going. But she will leave all she possesses behind. She is going in penance and poverty because we have failed to help her. If she dies, the blame will be ours alone.

"No," Joan said. "No. You have misunderstood—"

But it was too late. The crowd moved in. They gesticulated. Eyes lost anonymity. "Mother, we shall not allow you to go."

Joan flapped at them furiously with both hands, her gesture that of someone shaking crumbs from a tablecloth. "Bother, bother, bother—" she yelled—tears of vexation pricking her eyelids. "I want you to form your committee—"

Ah, yes—the committee.

And the islands, which had taken three weeks in coming to the point, now created a committee in just under twenty-two seconds. The elders from each village, with Joan and Prem Babu as joint chairmen. Then, one after another, the villagers started to take the dust off the feet of the mother who had come to save them.

Joan tried to protest. She jumped up on the table and pistoned her feet up and down as if she was treading on pins. Then, unable to stop them, she turned to escape through the back. But the crowd had swelled out of the



thickets of mist. She was hemmed in. Half laughing, half angry, she buried her face in her hands and submitted. For the moment, legend had conquered.

It was not of course as legend that Joan saw it. To her, it was a return of will-power and responsibility. The islands had taken their destiny once more into their own hands. And she worked frenziedly, as if daily expecting an atom bomb, to consolidate this destiny before it was too late.

Work-groups had to be formed according to castes. Even some of the low-caste families had to be persuaded not to consider the rôle of fishermen beneath their dignity, others made to train as carpenters, boat-builders, net-weavers and basket-makers. The three remaining Brahmin families—two of whom had some grasp of reading and writing—must take over the clerical side of the business. The Co-operative had to formulate its rules before it could be registered. And, until it was registered, the Government would not make over the flood relief grant. Even then the grant would only be handed to the Circle Officer, who was profoundly mistrustful of the whole scheme. "Yes, indeed, Miss Raydon. Indeed, yes. But what will occur when you leave—?" This was how all their conversations on the subject concluded. And the Circle Officer squashed his *topi* more firmly than ever over his ears.

What would, in fact, happen Joan scarcely gave herself time to think. Whenever she saw Miss Blatterhorn she made hasty reference to "a few more days." But she preferred to stay with her uncle when she visited Calcutta rather than at the hostel—in spite of her aunt's transports over the cyclamen blooming this year in the constellation of flower beds. With Hem Babu, the Vice-Chancellor, she had not even communicated.

The Committee of the Co-operative, although it took its duties gravely, treated their intricate problems with composure. Much to Joan's annoyance they insisted that the organisation's very first expenditure should be on a

large painted notice done in English and Bengali characters by the leading sign-writer in Dakshin. This they intended to erect over a triumphal arch outside the tent where the Co-operative Office was installed. The result looked as incongruous as those imposing gateways built before insignificant Buddhist burial mounds, when later generations "discovered" the mounds to contain the relics of a saint.

It was dedicated one evening with appropriate ceremony. The archway was hung with mango leaves. Conches startled the crows from the *neem* willows. A priest had been imported from the mainland for the occasion. A superb figure with soft silver hair reaching to his shoulders and a beard of the same profusion and texture that spread out in ripples like a stone bust of Homer. Dark, sleepy eyes and a fine forehead and nose were the only features not submerged. He poured clarified butter over a stone in the middle of the tent. Then after the ceremony, he sat back on his haunches in Olympian unconcern and lit a cheroot. Behind, on the hillock, lights winked in front of the image of Kali, where one of the villagers was singing a plaintive hymn accompanied on an *ahtara*-guitar hollowed out from a gourd.

Joan had given the celebration a wide berth. It seemed to her ironic that what was so obviously a defeat for Kali should be treated by the villagers as a victory. The ugly and vindictive Goddess would lose her ruined houses and dead palm trees. And the orphans and widows, the desperate wild-eyed children and shivering ~~women~~—now at last they would be rescued out of her hideous clutches. The ~~charnel~~ house in which she had exulted would be turned into a kernel of industry and progress.

She said to Manik Babu: "I don't see why anyone should make a fuss of Kali because of what's happened."

Manik Babu was a nephew of Norehen-Ma and head of the last Brahmin family left on Kaligram. He was small and dark with a boyish face badly pitted by small-pox. He worked as clerk-accountant to the co-operative.

"Mother Kaji was angry with us," he said: "But now she has relegated—"

"It seems to me that we have built the co-operative in our own strength. Surely that is the lesson we ought to learn from it?"

For reply Manik Babu bowed politely to Joan over folded palms. He had a painful smile, as if his lips, sewn together with pins, were agony to move.

## Four

JOAN had hired a bicycle. It relieved her from dependence on the dilatory bus service. She usually rode into the *mofussil* town by way of Rampur since this was shorter by two miles in spite of the uncertain nature of the roads, now baked to the sharp, jagged surface of rock. She enjoyed winter sunlight, the ordered space of the paddy fields broken into strong regular rhythms by clumps of rich evergreen and clustering villages, the cool breeze over her face like an angel's kiss. Most of all she enjoyed the skill needed to negotiate the corrugated dirt without falling off into the weed-grown dykes at the side. Twice, instead of skirting the hillock on which Rampur was built, she plunged through its winding coverts to call on the old walled house of the Bannerjees. She was greeted with quiet satisfaction by Ma, who told her that Kolyani had returned to Calcutta, where her husband had been offered a job in the income-tax department of the Government and that Krishna had almost as incongruously decided to cover a birth-control conference in Madras.

It was sunset on her second visit, "the time of cow-dust" Ma called it. The girls of the house stood in droves at every exit gracefully, sounding the conch.

Ma asked, "Do you believe in ghosts, Miss Joan?"

Joan laughed. "Then you won't mind bicycling alone in the dark?"

"Of course not. And I don't believe you would either, Ma."

"Ah, no, indeed. But I believe in ghosts—though I never see any." And she smiled, "I take the name of Kali and pass by unharmed."

Dilip Babu was ready at the gate with a polite sarcasm: "You ride a man's bicycle, I see. Now for our ladies that would not be appropriate. The *sari* prevents them from being such very determined organisers as you good Western ladies are."



One morning Joan received a telegram. The postman advertised it from the river bank, for he still refused to bring the post across himself (she really must speak about it to the Dakpur postmaster). The telegram was from Krishna, and called her urgently to Rampur. Remembering that it was only a few days off Christmas, Joan assumed it to be a typical Krishna trap to entice her into a holiday. But as she had to go to Calcutta tomorrow, she decided to look in and refuse the invitation as politely as possible on her way.

She arrived in the evening when the Western horizon was burnished red-gold and clouds to the East were shadowed by the setting sun into mountains of whipped cream. Crows had gathered in the palms. They chattered and shieked like a bootleg cocktail party. In the mango grove there was an artistic football match in bare feet. The cottages—each one hidden in its bower of foliage—seemed solid and cool and secret. They had taken colour from the sunset. Just now their walls of silver mud had turned to bronze and their straw roofs to pale gold. In the deep, soft shadows children were playing hop-sotch.

It was seductive, Joan admitted it and, looking at her

watch, she decided to limit herself to ten minutes in order to catch her train.

The courtyard was empty and silent. She called out and, after a few minutes, a head peered through a barred window. A girl's head that knew her perfectly well. Yet it went again without a sign of greeting. It was some time before Krishna wandered across the courtyard, bare-footed and frowning.

"Aha—it is good that you have come, Joan," and he turned and quietly led her away. On the stairs he paused. "Yesterday *Ma* was asking for you."

*Mu* had had another stroke. And this time no one expected her to recover. All night long the jungle pigeons had mobbed the old house, whirring away *chukoo, chukoo, chukoo*. Wasn't that a certain sign of death? Joan saw at once from the sad dignity with which the family greeted her that all hope had been abandoned.

Today *Ma* had been conscious for only a few seconds. She had whispered that she wanted to be carried on to the roof. So the sick room was now pitched there beneath the dissolving sky.

When dusk had fallen two of her nephews prepared to carry her down again. But Krishna held up his hand and motioned them to leave her where she was. They obeyed. He was plainly invested with a special authority, for his father, who sat bolt upright at the foot of the cot intently studying scriptures, took no part in the incident.

Kolyani had fetched her *eraj*, a lute with a long curved stem like the prow of a Polynesian craft. She was singing an evening melody to fit the rapidly falling shadows. A strange, haunting song:

*"See how the lotus is folded away at nightfall and  
how it slips in silence beneath the sparkling stream.  
And yet in the morning again it opens, again it  
gladdens the eye of the new-born day."*

A song of consolation—and yet every note was a spasm of hopeless, unbearable grief.

It is the same everywhere, Joan thought. Each of the world's religions pretends to a faith and fortitude in the face of death that it is very far from feeling. Besides what cowardice to believe that life is not worth living unless it continues afterwards. That is to make oneself an alien in the world ; to feel a rigid and dead thing when all around is gripped in a fever of movement. No—Joan rejected the idea passionately. How vain, greedy, childish that man alone should think himself worthy of the privilege.

And yet was she herself less hypocritical than those who called themselves religious? She didn't pretend to faith—yet even fortitude could be a fool's paradise. When death came, when one saw the white face crumbling before one's eyes, there was no charmed blue-print with which to defeat the horror. Fear nibbled the brain like a rat.

She remembered her first death. It was when her pony escaped from his paddock and fell down a pit in the dark. He had had to be destroyed. She was ten at the time and she'd adored that pony. No human friend of her childhood had meant as much. Aunt Dora said it was the will of God and that sometimes He wanted us to suffer. So Joan had rushed out across the downs shaking her fist at the sky and shouting "I hate you, I hate you" to the bearded sage whom she held responsible. But even then her preference for logic asserted itself. She argued that if God did indeed want her to suffer, then she was going to teach Him a lesson. She would keep a perfectly straight face so that no one—not even her Aunt Dora—should guess that she cared two pence for her pony's death. This would thwart the Old Man's scheme. So she had swallowed her rage and her tears and walked steadily back to the house. She had only ridden for two or three years more. At the age of thirteen she'd developed scruples about fox-hunting. She had scarcely thought about her pony since.

Now Ram Babu had started to intone the Gita in

Sanscrit. He recited rapidly in the whispered falsetto of a musical spinning top. With his spectacles on the tip of his nose, his drooping moustache and his flickering Adam's apple he looked extraordinarily removed from it all, the family priest rather than the husband of the dying woman. On a stool beside him stood a sealed brass jar.

The stars had come out with the hard and glittering stare of the winter tropics. Joan looked up rinsing her mind with astringent thoughts of infinity.

She shook herself. She was getting metaphysical. She was cramped and hungry. There was really no point in staying. Hardly a word had been spoken to her since she came and she was even sitting away from the rest on the step of the door that led out of the central turret. And yet she did not go. The murmur of Ram Babu's voice, the absolute stillness of those who were listening, the figures of the men wrapped in shawls and *dhotis* and standing silent on the edge of the roof; and in the courtyard the little group of villagers who had gathered at dusk carrying votive lamps—all this restored a grave dignity to life that, with her horrid hump of humanism, she knew herself apt to forget.

Towards midnight, when Ram Babu was starting on a second recitation, his time in Bengali, Joan fell asleep. Her head was wedged against the door lintel, her shoulder against the drum of paraffin from which they refilled the lamps.

She woke with a start. There was a sound of scuffling. Ma was struggling to stand up with something of her old energy and determination. Her feet were touching the ground. Kolyani and another of her nieces held her under the arms and tried to soothe her back on to the bed. Ma was muttering jerkily—as if each word was jabbed out of her by a hypodermic needle. She thought it was Saraswati Pujah—the day of the Goddess of Learning. The day when books of study must be placed before the image of the White Goddess who rides on a peacock. Ma had forgotten to put out her books. Her French books. They

must let her do it. She wanted to fetch her books and dedicate them before it is too late—

“But *Ma*—it isn’t Saraswati Pujah. Saraswati Pujah is not for more than a month. There is plenty of time to put out the books you wish. Now lie quiet, *Ma*. It is too early to get up.”

“*Ma*,” said Krishna. “Joan has come to see you. Would you like to see Joan?”

“Ah, Miss Joan.” And *Ma* allowed herself to be moulded back on to the bed, her old face working in a last effort to recover her reason.

Joan came forward, surprised and wide awake.

“Here is Joan, *Ma*.”

“Ah, Miss Joan.” *Ma* struggled up on to an elbow. Krishna motioned Joan to give her support. “Ah, Miss Joan, you are here.” The lips worked with a horrible grimacing effort but the words were the barest whisper. “That is good.” And then *Ma* opened her eyes wide and looked slowly round the circle of relatives bent over her in the lamplight as if, not remembering what it was she wanted to say, she was in terror lest they were unable to help her. Then she gave a sudden crow of triumph. She had remembered. “*Tumi amar meye*—you are my daughter, Miss Joan,” she almost shouted it. “My daughter—” Her body went rigid with the strain and her head fell heavily back against Joan’s supporting arm.

Joan was not sure how long she stayed there kneeling uncomfortably on the ground, holding the head still in the position in which it had fallen. Now that the old lady’s determination was gone all the granite strength of her face dissolved before one’s eyes, like a rock blasted in slow motion. The mouth fell apart, the nostrils dilated, the cheeks seemed to sink inwards, a gruesome chink of light showed through the half-closed lids.

Suddenly Ram Babu rose from the foot of the cot. Then put his hand underneath the coverlet to feel his wife’s feet. Without a word he picked up the little brass pot that had been by his side throughout the night. A



murmur of "Haribol"—"Praise be to God"—rose like a sigh from those at the bedside. Ram Babu took the old lady's head from Joan's arm and laid it with great care on the pillow.

He was frowning and had pursed his lips, like someone intent on exactly fulfilling instructions. It was only when she saw the expression on his face that Joan realised for the first time what had happened. Ma was dead.

"Om Ganga Narayana Brahma Om," Ram Babu sprinkled a few drops of Ganges water on his wife's prostrate body.

Then: "Is this the Dawn?"

"Yes, it is Dawn."

And turning to the East, hands lifted high above his forehead, standing thin and fierce and erect to greet eternity, Ram Babu repeated the last beautiful Hindu salutation.

*"Oh, Mother Earth, Father Sky,  
Brother wind, Friend light,  
Sweetheart waer,  
Here take my last greetings with folded hands.  
For today I am melting away into the supreme,  
Because my heart became pure,  
And all delusion vanished,  
Through the power of your good company."*

It had the precision and formality of a military funeral. Grief transposed into grandeur and restraint. Then as he finished, Kolyani broke into a first heartrending cry of bereavement and one after another the girls knelt sobbing round the wooden bed. Ram Babu stood in the middle. "We must not cry," he said, his Adam's apple bobbing gravely up and down. "We must not make it difficult for her to go."

Uncertain what to do, Joan walked over to the edge of the roof. Yes, it was indeed the dawn. The ribbon of light round the hem of the night sky had expanded to a ring

of fire, pearly, opalescent, shining. The first vibrations of light were as soft and silvery as a lisp of *chambals*. Then tattered flags of mist unfurled themselves from the earth and curled upwards streaked with scarlet. The music swelled. The earth became a vast and resonant sounding board. A thousand colours exploded and vanished as fast as fireworks. Trees rushed out of the darkness. Birds all started to chant and chatter at once. Then there was a roll on the big drums, a shattering chord on the tubas. Hurrah, he had come—the trumpeter, the sun, blasting his way upwards above the rim of the earth.

Krishna joined her and they stood watching in silence. At length he said: "Joan, be a good girl. Look after yourself properly on those islands. I'm afraid you are doing too much—"

"Oh, my dear man, the islands already think my precautions crazy enough," and she lightly touched his arm. Somehow his detachment moved her more than any wild explosion of grief.

The dawn was over. They turned back to the bedside. The embroidered coverlet had been pulled tactfully over Ma's face. But Krishna gently folded it down again.

He said: "Ma loved the dawn. Once she told me that to see the sunrise was to visit God's holiest temple. I expect that's why she wanted us to bring her up here. Perhaps she hoped to taste it once more before she became part of it herself—"

The new light played cruel tricks with the putty-coloured head. Joan could see why the others had wanted to hide it. It was horribly riddled with holes and hollows, as if shot through by bullets that had left no trace of blood. Mouth, cheeks, eyes, ears, nostrils had turned to gaping wounds in which the shadows congealed.

As Krishna looked down he was smiling. But it was his father who spoke: "It is well," he said, "we must not lay the slightest blame on God—"

On the far side of the roof *Dhip Babu* had started his morning *yoga*. He had taken the peacock pose and lifting

his body rigidly parallel to the ground he walked on his wrists six paces forwards and then six paces back. He repeated this ten times with an air of fanatical dedication.

## Five

JOAN had curtained off a bathroom in the corner of her hut, tacking brown paper over the bamboo lattice window. Here she sluiced herself with lukewarm water and was proud of her simple, sensible adaptation of Western habits to village needs. Imagine her horror when one day—stark naked in the middle of her ablutions—she saw three pairs of mischievous young eyes watching her through holes cut in the paper. Not the least embarrassing thing was to realise that this peep-show had been going on for some time. For she had first noticed a couple of gashes before Christmas and had thought no more about them. There was only one way to keep her dignity. She would have to bathe in the tank up by the Temple like all the other villagers.

But she underestimated the skill needed to carry out this new operation without infringing modesty. The custom was to descend fully-clad into the tank—a reservoir of rain water cut out of the earth and fringed with banana trees—and then to change into clean clothes on the bank. First Joan's tight white dress got stuck in her hair clips. Then with her exertions she shook the bath towel off her shoulders and was left shivering on the bank in brassière and smalls. Kaligraam was polite but interested, it had never seen such garments before.

That evening Norener-Ma left two *saris* on the veranda for her mistress. She had borrowed them from some neighbour's meagre wardrobe. The old lady said nothing—merely pointed to the gift. Joan asked what the *saris* were for. Even then Norener-Ma did not answer

directly. Mother could change into a fresh one every day, hanging the wet, washed garment out to dry after her bath. Besides there would be no need to undress at night.

Joan sighed. So they had noticed her sleeping habits, too. It was true that she could not close the windows of her hut nor lock herself in. But she had always gone to bed in the dark. By this means she had hoped to get away with her Sen Street practice of sleeping in nothing but a flannel cummerbund. She was convinced that by thus leaving the pores open and yet protecting herself from chills she had managed all these years to prevent her stomach from taking infection. But even that cherished routine had been observed by the relentless affection of the village.

She fingered the *saris*, folded on the edge of the veranda like bed-sheets. After all there was no point in being prejudiced about them. She could wear them high up the leg. Most women in the village did that anyway, because of the mud. She refused, however, to copy those little, tripping, rippling steps. She had learnt to walk on the Sussex Downs, wind in her face, arms swinging, and a stride that carried her relentlessly forward as though to some vital appointment on the summit. Of course, she would look perfectly absurd in a *sari*. She always did. She was too tall and lean. But that didn't matter. She only had a hand-bag mirror and would not be able to see further than her face.

Next morning, as if on purpose to reassure her, village women trooped in a long file to congratulate Joan on her appearance. The *sari* suited Mother perfectly. She had assuredly worn it all her life. There was only one small thing. Her hair did not fit. They knew it must be a great sorrow to Mother to have to wear those tight little rolls like cucumbers pinned to the top of her head. But they had brought some oil. Mustard oil smelled, but that was because it was strong. Several women in the village had been born with horribly wavy hair. But they had applied

a little mustard oil every day and now their hair was as straight and smooth and shining as that of the Goddess Lakshmi herself.

Joan lifted her hands in surrender. Yet another battle lost. The women settled round her, removing hairpins with exclamations of grief and astonishment at their size and number, then they started devotedly to comb, oil, massage, and search for lice. Joan looked in her tiny mirror. She could not help smiling. With her thick hair spread over her shoulders, she resembled an effeminate early Briton whom she had once seen romantically reconstructed in the museum at Brighton. The same honey-coloured skin, winged nostrils and wide lips. But she flattered herself that at least her eyes were larger and more humorous and the mole on the tip of her chin unique. She wondered why Bengali women had such horror of hair that was not perfectly straight. Perhaps it was for the same reason as the American Negro who wanted to pass as white. The Bengalis were anxious to eradicate signs of their Negroid, Dravidian ancestry. Witness their appeals for "fair-skinned" brides published daily in the press. As she made a mental record of the fact for her note-book the lank ends of her hair were tied tightly into a bun with black ribbon. It looked like a rat's tail in mourning.

The truth was that all the women and children on the islands had leaped to Joan's service, treating her as if she was a mixture of visiting royalty and a near relative suffering from a fatal disease. Norencr-Ma had merely been the advance guard. It was not so much any personal trait in Joan to which they had responded. It was more that, after years, lived in a numb and apathetic mist, any outsider who showed concern would have been welcomed as a messenger of sunlight. Their one anxiety was to bind the messenger with unbreakable chords of feeling. For the Gods had not merely deprived them of food but of affection as well.

The children were assigned special tasks. Sita washed

Joan's veranda once a week with a mixture of mud and cow-dung. She was a tiny, dark-skinned girl, with large, roguish eyes and a bewitching smile. Eight months before she had had her hair cropped by a team of visiting de-lousers—which prompted Joan to arrange for Nilu and some of the hostel medical students to carry out a mass injection against cholera. The short cut suited Sita. It brought out her delicate perfection of feature. She would walk across the yard carrying an enormous cow-pat with all the grace and dignity of a page bearing the Crown Jewels. Where and whose was the cow Joan never discovered. It had not occurred to her that Kaligram could still support such a luxury. Perhaps the pat fell like weekly manna from heaven.

Two boys, Govinda and Mojid, were charged with the task of fishing for the village guest—at least until the first co-operative catch came in. Day after day they waited patiently down by the water's edge, Mojid rattling a knife on a brass plate to attract the fish to the surface, while Govinda stood by the side ready to grab them when they came. This ludicrous design they accomplished with an indefinable air of civilisation and breeding. But they never equalled the splendour of Norener-Ma's first trout.

One day Govinda came running up to the hut. "Mother the Asoka tree is flowering. It hasn't flowered since the floods. It must be because you have come. We say the Asoka tree only flowers when it hears the step of a beautiful woman."

"Don't be silly," Joan replied, primly. "The salt water affected its roots when the river came up three years ago. But it wasn't killed and now it has gathered strength again to put out more flowers." But as she spoke she noticed that Govinda was grinning. He had not meant the compliment to be very serious.

She was not usually as pedantic as this with the children. In fact she was fascinated by the mixture of familiarity and respect with which they treated her. At home, respect distanced adults from children while

friendliness ended in an orgy of backslapping and fake *bonhomie*—both of which Joan equally disliked. But here, although the children called her “Mother” and delighted to tease, they were genuinely grieved if she prevented them from garlanding her or taking the dust off her feet. She shared an increasing number of private jokes with them. They were fascinated by her watch (they had never seen one before) and although they had an accurate idea of the quarters of the sun and moon, they continually asked her the time. When she replied “seventy minutes past twenty-five” they ran off doubled up with laughter as if she had made a brilliant witticism.

## 2.

With the men of the village, Joan's relations were a trifle more ambiguous. She never penetrated behind Prem Babu's bowings and “*namaskars*” and at committee meetings, although he looked immensely wise, he rarely opened his mouth. Once or twice she found him in earnest consultation with groups of villagers. Prem Babu broke these off abruptly as soon as she appeared, but with the gratified smile of someone who had been caught paying secret compliments to the intruder. During the last few weeks his business had become unusually urgent and he was away for days on end. One of the stuffed men, Joan concluded. Head-piece filled with tissue paper and mottos.

The peasants treated her with more servility than the women-folk did. They agreed to do anything she suggested and even, under vigorous supervision, actually started to do it. But all this not because they really understood her ideas so much as because it was “Mother” who had made the suggestion. The words “Mother says so-and-so” brought an abrupt end to every argument. This worried Joan. She told herself over and over again that she *must not become indispensable*. Hadn't she persuaded her university classes to criticise what she

said? Implored them to be rude, to pull every word to pieces, not to hold back merely because she was a foreigner with a white skin? And they had responded. She was famous for having the liveliest lectures in the faculty. But now it was always "You know best, Mother" and she found herself forced to pronounce on questions which she had scarcely thought about till that very moment. How many families should be employed on fishing, how many on weaving the nets, how should the first small profits be divided. The discussions were shrewd, earnest, vigorous enough—but when it came to a decision all eyes turned to Mother with a look of dim, almost protoplasmic patience that drove Joan frantic. It seemed at such moments as if they retreated deliberately from the burden of having to think.

Pachu was the one villager who had qualities of leadership. Pachu was a Muslim from Pipha. Before the disaster he was a good, solid yeoman farmer, winning his position by hard work and by intelligently farming his own land—while most of his Hindu neighbours were content, because of caste restrictions, to delegate agriculture to the unenlightened. Now Pachu was emaciated with hunger and even his beard was as sparse as a field of corn bleached by drought. Yet he had retained the manners of a Persian prince and an aquiline beauty to match them. Joan soon noticed how quick he was to grasp new ideas and how clearly he was able to explain them to others. He became Organising Secretary to the Co-operative and travelled daily from island to island handling the details of the scheme with tact and competence.

With Joan, Pachu had a very special relationship. He did not call her Mother like the rest—but *Didi*, "elder sister." And when he talked to her his face wore an odd smile. It was not a sarcastic smile, nor the sort of smile most people wear when they are trying to be nice to foreigners. It was a smile which seemed to relish some secret absurdity in the situation. Here am I, Pachu Sahib



from Pipha, and here is this English lady. She is my elder sister, she is setting up as a fishmonger and I am her chief assistant. Well, really, what will Allah be up to next?

Yet in spite of his air of sophistication and breeding, Joan was constantly reminded of Pachu's simplicity. He would not allow the boatbuilder's hut to be sited on the one vacant spot available in Ragpur. It was too near a grove of bamboos and, bamboos, as everyone knew, only brought bad luck. And although himself a Muslim, he insisted that they consult a Brahmin and cast a horoscope to find the day most favourable to the launching of their first co-operative boat.

This boat was launched at the beginning of February. A few days later there were quite a fleet of them on the river, funny little *dhows* with curved ends and a straw hut in the middle like miniature Noah's arks. Most of them had been bought. For the first two made in the co-operative workshop were not sea-worthy and sank after only an hour afloat.

The same week the Public Works Department, after maddening delays, found a contractor willing to build the catchment basin at the head of the river and the co-operative opened a fish stall in Dakpur market. In fact, in just under three months, the scheme had got under way. The Circle Officer practically exploded with admiration.

Joan could no longer escape the inevitable. It was time for her to leave.

But she did not want to leave. It was absurd, of course. She knew it. Her place on the committee could perfectly well be taken by the Circle Officer, he was quite competent and sympathetic enough to give the development of the Co-operative the necessary supervision.

Yes, at its present level. But at the moment the scheme was providing no more than a bare subsistence for forty families and there were at least one hundred other families who were clamouring to be brought in.

Is it your job to worry about that? You have started

the thing off, shown how energy and effort could make it grow. Now you must withdraw and leave the rest to the locals.

And what if the scheme fails? After all, things have only just begun. It's not more than three weeks since the first wages were paid—

All that's a rationalisation. The fact is you're getting thoroughly sentimental about your villagers. You've always prided yourself on being dispassionate, on not becoming involved emotionally with the people whom you tried to serve. But, now, here you are falling for all the old folksy clichés about communion with the soil and the noble culture of the Indian peasant.

But that's not true. Just think for instance how you hate the food. Three months of this ghastly tinned milk and processed cheese, tasting more like floor polish every day. And the discomfort. Heavens, as if I'd ever enjoyed the simple life. Don't I curse out loud when the insects crawl and flutter and fornicate round my storm lantern every evening?—at least until I find I'm swallowing a packet of moths whenever I open my mouth. Aren't I groaning this very minute at having to crouch on the veranda to check the accounts? And doesn't my back ache and a drowsy numbness pain my feet as if I had drunk something considerably more harmful than hemlock? Oh, for the tables and chairs and reasonable privacy of Sen Street—

Well what are you waiting for then? You see? You don't move. I knew you wouldn't. The real truth is that there are other reasons for your not wanting to go back. You can't bear failure. Those wretched drains would be on your mind the whole time—and you'd know there was nothing you could do about them. Absolutely nothing. The job was too big. Whereas here, a handful of credulous and illiterate peasants call you "Mother" and treat you as an Incarnation of one of their Earth Goddesses—and your ego goes on a jamboree—

Joan threw her pencil on the veranda in disgust and

then leaned back against the *chach*. She'd never wasted all this time day-dreaming before. It was probably because she had made a mess of things. At 36 most people would have spun their own world round them, so that they lived permanently in a congenial atmosphere—just as white ants create the humidity they need to survive. But she had never bothered about that sort of cosy, humdrum cocoon. She thought she was free of the need of it. And she had ended by wrecking herself on a desert island instead.

She looked out across the river. A desert island ? That, of course, was equally exaggerated. There was something remote, beautiful, moving, even, in this desolation. If she hadn't blinded herself so deliberately these last fifteen years it wouldn't have taken her so much by surprise. But since she'd caught the work-bug, such luxuries as landscape, entertainment, sculpture, had been taboo. Sunlight on the backs of leather-bound books, a good class-room, walls washed with white, bright colours—those were the only sort of things she'd allowed herself to notice. All the rest had been banished till the underprivileged could afford it, too.

This evening the water was so still that the pale sky was perfectly mirrored in it. It was hard to tell reflection from reality. Islands, villages, clumps of palm hung in mid-air: the whole atmosphere seemed to be holding its breath.

What nonsense. A quail rebuked her sharply from the undergrowth. *Tea-kettle-khak, tea-kettle-khak*. Then a myna-bird broke into angry chatter. The usual orchestra was tuning up. It was the moment before dusk on an evening of February mist. That was all. The sort of evening when the undernourished and underclad caught bronchitis, then developed double pneumonia and died. That was the real meaning of this dank, furry water-colour.

Suddenly she saw Pachu disembarking from a boat and coming towards her through the mist. He was holding his

bright check Muslim skirt clear of the mud and springing to firm ground with the delicate grace of a grasshopper.

"Pachu, Oy—Pachu," she called. She had made up her mind to tell him her decision to leave.

"Have you heard the news, *Didi*?" His eyes were suspiciously bright and humorous. The news must be bad.

"They've lost their catch?"

"About the new co-operative."

"New co-operative?"

"Yes, they are forming a co-operative on the bank of the river—"

"But who is forming it?"

"Some fishermen from higher up—"

"Why?"

"Prem *Babu* has persuaded them."

"Prem *Babu*?!!"

Pachu stood there with his odd smile and his head tilted to one side like an intelligent bird. "Prem *Babu* has been working against us since he left."

Joan wailed: "Prem *Babu*'s left? But no one told me."

Pachu shrugged. Such things, he implied, were part of the atmosphere. They did not need to be told: "They say he has offered his services to *Babu* Dilip Bandapadaya and—"

"Dilip *Babu* from Rampur?"

"Yes: And to the other landlord on the District Board. Harish Chandra *Moshre*, that is."

"But—" Joan boggled. This, she reminded herself, weakly, was India. All seemed smooth and smiling on the surface—like the February evening—and then suddenly it had split from side to side. An earthquake, a cataclysm. And underneath—a nest of crawling serpents. Pachu continued to smile, intent on rapidly widening the split.

"Yes, the landowners always wanted to move us. The two of them on the District Board made the Board refuse to distribute relief grants unless we did so. They had

their own reasons for that. No doubt of it, *Didi*. Since the new laws depriving them of their *zamindari* lands they have become like tigers in a year of drought. Once they'd moved us on to the barren river bed behind then they'd have collared the islands for themselves. Perhaps they'd even have breached the dikes so that the river changed its course again. Then we would have been left homeless once more with ourselves in possession of all the land that had formerly belonged to us—"

"But this is fantastic. What on earth makes you believe such things?"

"*Prem Babu*."

"*Prem Babu*?"

"Yes, *Prem Babu*."

"But how do you mean, *Prem Babu*?" Really this repetition was maddening.

"*Prem Babu* was an enemy of *Dilip Babu's*. Some quarrel about property rights. It was he who told us the plans of the landowners on the District Board. He who advised us to stay where we were. When you first came, *Didi*, he said you were an agent of *Dilip Babu's* too—"

"I?"

"Yes, when you came with that gentleman on the first day—"

"The Circle Officer?"

"No—not the Circle Officer *Sahib*. We know him. He is a good man. When you came with another gentleman—a cultured gentleman. *Prem Babu* said that that gentleman was a relative of *Dilip Babu's*. And we believed him. That's why we refused to join the Committee when you wanted us to. Remember? Then we began to see that *Prem Babu* was wrong, and that you had not come to exploit us for the sake of the landlords."

"But *Prem Babu* was obstinate. He started to change his tune. He said that co-operative ownership meant no one owning anything. He said you had come to make riots and bloodshed. He said that when you had finished no one would escape from prison. He said that *Dilip*

*Babu* had been right all along and that we ought to have moved—”

“But these other fishermen—what are they doing?”

“Fishing.” *Pachu* inclined his head a shade further and smiled. Not really so extraordinary, he seemed to say, what else would you expect them to do?

“Yes, I know they are fishing—but where? Where?”

“They say the water isn’t ours. They say the land underneath may be—but not the water on top. They say the fish live in the water, not on the land and that therefore they have the same right to fish as we have.”

“But why should they *want* to do this? What profit will they get from it?”

“Someone has told them that we are going to steal all the best fish in the lower part of the river before it reaches them. Someone has told them that we will train three hundred new fishermen with modern tackle paid for by the Government and that we will force them out of business—”

“Oh, bother—bother—bother—”

*Joan* had started to throw belongings into her Gladstone bag. The news was a call to combat—but where, when and how battle was to be joined, that remained to be seen.

“Where are you going, *Didi*?”

“I shall get the first morning train to Calcutta. We must have the best possible legal advice.”

Through the clouds of dust which the explosion had caused, she still could not see how the landscape had suffered. Was she filled with a final aversion for her islands or was she, on the contrary, bound to them more firmly than ever before? She needed time to think. That was one of the reasons why she must spend the night on *Dakpur* railway station. She saw that now. So much easier to think there than here, where people drifted in and out to gossip. Of one thing she was already certain. If her own comfortable notions had been damaged, *Krishna’s* had been blown sky-high. How would he defend his ludicrous

theory now? The islanders bowing in resignation beneath the will of God! And all the time they had been clinging to their pathetic rag of poverty because they thought his own uncle would grab it if they moved!

What would he say to that?

### 3.

Nothing. When she tackled him next morning Krishna was unruffled by her picture of village intrigue. Instead of admitting any setback to his ideas of rural serenity he launched into a long monologue about Dilip Babu.

Dilip Babu had been heading for a brilliant career in the Indian Civil Service at the time of the First World War. Then the police found terrorist literature in his office, and he was accused of being one of the ring-leaders in a plot to murder an English District Magistrate. He received a five-year prison sentence. Dilip Babu maintained that the literature had been planted. He came out of prison morbid and embittered. The girl who had been booked to marry him had waited with exemplary patience, yet he could never rid himself of the suspicion that she had been unfaithful. He treated her scandalously. Beat her if she showed the slightest independence of spirit. She had died of consumption two years after Kolyani was born. Krishna's family then adopted Kolyani and Dilip Babu retired to an *Ashran* in the Himalayas in a mood of penitence and self-disgust. He had stayed there for nearly 15 years, not emerging till just before the war, when he went to live at Rampur. They had all thought him cured. His sarcasm and ungovernable temper seemed under control, while his brilliant intelligence and physical strength had if anything increased. He soon became the right-hand man of Krishna's eldest uncle, who was then still alive and managing the family estate. On this uncle's death Dilip Babu took over the estate himself as bailiff. It was not until Krishna's father retired and his parents went to live at Rampur themselves

that the extent of Dilip *Babu's* unpopularity in the neighbourhood and the tyrannical power which he exercised over the peasants came to be known. But things had improved. Although Krishna's father had not felt inclined to carry the burden of the estate on his own shoulders, *Ma* had not scrupled to use every artifice to keep Dilip *Babu* at bay. *Ma*, in fact, seemed to be the one person whom he respected. With *Ma* gone it might well be more difficult to control him.

Krishna put the tips of his fingers together and peered judicially above the rim of his spectacles. "Dilip *Babu* is an organiser with nothing to organise. A genius who has never come off. Such people are always a problem—"

Joan had not come to waste pity on Dilip *Babu*: "I daresay," she said impatiently, "but what exactly are you going to do about it?"

Krishna shook his head and sighed: "Village politics are complicated. I'm afraid you may have taken on too much, Joan."

Joan was already seething with indignation. She had had a sleepless night in the Dakpur waiting-room, where the station-master had disputed her right to remove live-stock from the benches. There was a limit to the amount of detachment that Krishna could expect her to swallow: "If that is all you can say when these wretched islands are starving—" and she jerked her lean, nervous hands from point to point.

"But I'm worried about *you*, too, Joan."

Joan jumped up off her chair but she carefully controlled her voice. Look, I am a rational being. I am not losing my temper. I am standing merely so that the truth can flash out of me with greater force. "My good man," she said, "I'm not impressed with your worry. It seems, I'm afraid, a trifle tainted. I can see now why you've been against me helping the islands all along. But if you landlords can't rise above such disgraceful selfishness—then you'll only have yourselves to blame for the result—" And as she strode to the door, she thought: "This is it—"



the showdown. It's people like him who have made India her own worst enemy. If only he had a fraction of *Ma's* character, then, at least, I could still respect him—"

This dramatic exit took Krishna by surprise. He had been watching the pulse in her long neck with rapt and bony attention.

Humped in his chair, he took off his spectacles and heaved a long, slow sigh: "She has identified herself. She has learned to love. Perhaps in the end it will be all right." But the thought did not carry much conviction.

#### 4.

"Yes, dear girl, 1908—*that's* when I was called to the Bar. The year Signoripetta won the Derby at 100-1, and a Gibson Girl married into the peerage. The year—if one can be forgiven for mentioning a triviality in the same breath—the year of the launching of Germany's biggest battleship. In those old days which Tories say were golden. So long ago, in fact, that my knowledge of the law is guaranteed to lose a cast-iron case."

Her uncle was having a hot shower. Between syllables he spouted like a sperm whale. For the next few moments vigorous soapings and splashings were all that could be heard through the head curtain of his Holy, of holies, although Joan had the impression that he continued to reminisce. Then he started to towel himself and became audible once again.

"*De facto*, then, the water is probably yours. But to establish it *de jure* you might have to go to court. *De India*, of course, the answer is perfectly simple. You divert an agreed portion of your fish to the local Police *Thana*. Your opponents, being less well organised, will not be able to afford as much. From then on everything should be plain sailing (or don't your fishermen sail?)—unless of course the police have the *nous* to accept emoluments from both sides. But being a rural *Thana* I doubt if they will. That's one of the refinements of city life. A

delicious example of what one might call the double-take came my way recently—I haven't told it you, have I? The manager of one of our newer night clubs offered a small consideration to a go-ahead young constable if he would keep the road clear of waiting taxis outside the club entrance. The taxis blocked the run-in for Americans who came in their own cars. The manager did not want to lose such rich and esteemed clients. The policeman was then loaded with gift packets by each of two rival groups of taxis, on the understanding that members of the other group would not be allowed to park. And finally the arm of the law collected from the individual taxis themselves as they drove up. The reason? Defective rear lights, for which his officer, who, so he said, was out on the snoop, would be sure to bring a charge unless they moved off in double-quick time—too quick, of course, for the drivers to check the lights for themselves. What do you think of that? Underpay your police and develop their private enterprise—"

Sir Fleetwood emerged, a towel wound tightly round his pink and pendulous paunch.

"Colonel Blimp," he said, "without the moustache. Excuse the immodesty, dear girl, but I'm in a hurry."

He was obviously proud of his flesh. But Joan turned away—after months of coffee, ochre and polished oak, the sight struck her as repellent.

She said: "I'm serious about this, Uncle. If you can't advise us, then perhaps you could introduce me to someone who can."

Sir Fleetwood had taken a silk shirt and retired into his dressing-room: "As for that, dear girl, at the moment an introduction from me would just about kill any project stone-dead. Ever since my leader about the Prime Minister's visit to China my days have been numbered. That's what the Board Meeting's about this evening. My views unrepresentative of Indian opinion, damaging the circulation of the paper and all that. Of course the real trouble is that I once described the Chairman as pre-

siding over us like a defaced public monument and it has got back to him. Why have Indians no sense of humour? Because—if they had—being themselves the supreme comics, they would never be able to stop laughing—”

Seven, hundred and fifty words—calculated on the lecture speed of 150 words a minute—of which no more than one hundred had any relevance to the questions she had asked him. Surely, at 73, one ought to have grown tired of the sound of one's own voice? Joan made little scolding noises in her throat, unsuccessfully trying to interrupt. “Oh, Uncle, I'm sorry—but *please* do let's keep to the point. We've so little time—”

“The point being,” said her uncle tying his tie, “this rather fishy speculation of yours? But, dear girl, you can't really expect us common-sense merchants to go on tilting at your windmills for ever. Just think—quite apart from that mystery woman you made me employ in the Delhi Office—how you persuaded me to take a header into your sewage. Most embarrassing—especially since it turned out to be the Communists and not yourself who were managing the thing. Luckily, of course, that scavenger strike of theirs was a complete farce—”

“Oh,” she said, “I didn't know anything about that—And, anyhow, I—”

“Didn't you see? It was in the papers—it fizzled out after about half-an-hour. It seemed to leave the streets rather cleaner than they were before.”

“I haven't time to see the papers down at Kaligram—but the point is—”

#### 4.

• “Is it really serious this trouble of Uncle Fleetwood's with the Board? He seemed in a difficult mood—”

Lady Raydon looked away and sighed dramatically: “What did he tell you about it?”

“Something to do with some editorial or other—a

a quarrel with the Chairman of his Board of Directors—”

“Oh, *that*—” And Lady Raydon busied herself arranging a pot of ferns in front of a Tibetan silk banner.

“Why—is there something else?”

Her aunt did not answer for some time. Then: “I oughtn’t to tell you, of course. Your Uncle doesn’t even know I know. But it’s all such a desperate misery. Do you remember that secretary he had some years back called Trudy? The Eurasian—no, I *won’t* use the term Anglo-Indian. To us old-stagers it sounds so *dreadfully* wrong. Well, Trudy married in 1949 and left the office. Her husband was a French business man. A lapsed Catholic. Then after three years he repented and said he was living in sin. He left with the merger of the North French possessions and went back to France taking their little boy with him. Trudy wrote that she was willing to be converted, but he never answered her letters. Finally she went to your uncle for advice and help. He—well, he took her out to dinner. And then—well, dear—perhaps you can imagine the rest.” Her aunt twisted the fringe of her Kashmiri shawl. “I’m sure your uncle has been very kind to her—”

“But, Aunt Fredegonde, how long has this been going on?”

“Going on? Oh, I don’t know, dee-ar. I don’t expect it ‘went on’ exactly at all. But the girl told a friend who still works at the office. And now it’s come to the ears of the Board. You know what standards India has in such things. I’m afraid it’s strengthened the hand of those who want to get rid of your Uncle. But, oh my dee-ar, it seems *such* a pity! After all these years to be persecuted because of a ‘silly mistake—’ And trying heroically to smile instead of cry Lady Raydon pushed back her hair that had broken limply over her bony forehead like spray on a rock.

“And now, dee-ar—I want you to stay to tea—”

“I’m afraid I—”

“Yes, dear—you must. I do so want you to meet Ram

Prasad. The cook's just brought him to us from Myemensingh. Would you believe that he instinctively knows how to handle a tea-cup—even though he's never seen one before? He crooks his little finger just as if he'd spent all his life in a drawing-room. Such manners. I shall let him pour out so that you can see what I mean—"

Joan firmly and finally excused herself: "But, Aunt, Indians have been using tea-cups for centuries. Someone's even excavated them in one of the prehistoric cities. Don't you remember? You told me about it yourself."

## 5.

"No, Mimi, I will not have you turning the girl into one of your Faith histories. Oh, I know she looks ill—ghastly, and she doesn't help things by wearing that hideous homespun *sari* as if it was a winding sheet. But making oneself ill isn't an automatic badge of sainthood. It can just as well be a sign of pig-headed silliness. And in your Joan's case, that, I'm afraid, is just exactly what I think it is. She's heading for dippy spinsterdom at the speed of a jet rocket. Fancy thinking that she—*she* of all people—could convert Bengali fishermen to L.S.E. doctrines of social organisation in no more than a few weeks. It's almost Victorian in its complacency. The I.C.S. at its worst never believed in anything half so wicked. And then when I hinted at all the failures she'd had in the past, she went prickly. Like a Communist who looks at you, when you remind him of some particularly outrageous *volte-face*."

Even Lady Raydon was surprised at the explosive force of the diatribe. Perhaps the Board Meeting had gone worse than her husband was willing to admit. She screwed up her courage:

"Fleetwood, I ought to tell you, dear, I—I think I've heard something about you—well dee-ar, about this trouble—"

"My good woman, you'd be deaf if you hadn't. Every-

one else in Calcutta seems to have known for weeks—”

“Oh, my dee-ar—I do *wish* you’d told me—”

“Now, listen Mimi, I didn’t tell you for the very good reason that I didn’t want you to be mawkish. And I’m not going to have you being mawkish now—”

“Fleetwood, please, please let me help,” and she turned to him, flinging her arms wide in a Wagnerian gesture. “Surely there must be *something* I can do?”

“Yes, dear, there is. Be as calm and stately as you know how. Put on that magnificent ‘I’m-above-it-all’ act that you’ve been practising for years. Don’t be injured; or helpless or sympathetic and for heaven’s sake spare us the forgiving wife—” and as Lady Raydon floundered helplessly into tears, veils and beads and fringes trembling, he put an arm round her: “There, my dear, you’re a big girl now, so mop up quick and prove you’re as sensible as I’ve always suspected you were—”

It was one of the few intimate moments of their marriage. “

## Six

MARCH. At dawn great corridors of light slid across the water rubbing away the mist. Or Kaligram the boys were up early tapping the tall palm trees for molasses which the village used instead of sugar. Dew gathered on the fine tips of the *pepu* leaves and *knokils* shouted exultantly from their branches. In a month the spring paddy would have been harvested and the earth bleached to the colour of rags by the burning heat. But now it was March and at mid-day the sun was merely warm and mellow. The trees—*neem*, *bel*, *krishna chura*, and myrtle were covered with brilliant blossom. It was the last fling of a world condemned to death. Dusk fell quietly. Soft mist crept up from the river.

curdling the air. At sunset the *khokil* changed his call: three deep, satisfied, fluting notes as rich in fruit and hairy caterpillars as an Italian tenor in *pasta* and olive oil.

Joan's third visit in Calcutta had proved luckier. The young District Magistrate welcomed her with a crisp smile. He, like herself, had been laundered at London University in the '30s. He agreed to instruct the local police that poaching in waters where the land beneath was previously owned by the islanders should be forbidden. If the rival co-operative wished to dispute ownership, they would have to do so in a law court. The burden of proof was on *them*. As far as Joan could make out the Dakpur police never acted on these instructions. But it made no difference. The other co-operative broke up of its own accord—when one of its members did a moonlight flit with funds collected for the purchase of fishing nets.

What excuse was there now for her to stay? Well, the winter term would soon be coming to an end in Calcutta. But she dismissed that as irrelevant. After all there was plenty of work to be done before the start of the new one. No, she *must* leave. But before going she decided to draw up the Co-operative's first quarterly account so as to have a clear picture of the progress they had made.

The picture was not reassuring. There were now some 25 boats out fishing every day, yet the profit earned was still not sufficient for more than a subsistence wage to employees. There seemed little chance of paying the annual dividend promised to the other islanders who had invested their share of the Government grant. It was Pachu who suggested a solution. They were discussing the cause of last week's low return.

"The *tatis* don't like to take carts round by Rampur," Pachu explained. "This means that they are getting late to the stalls and have to sell cheap."

"But they should go the quick way. I thought we had agreed—"

"They say it is haunted, *Didi*—"

“ Haunted ? ”

“ Yes, *Didi*. They say there is a grove of *pepul* trees which is full of Hindu ghosts—”

“ Are you sure they are not Muslims ? ” Joan asked, it was hard to tell whether Pachu was serious, for he wore his habitual smile.

“ Oh, no! *Didi*—they’re not Muslims. It’s only the Hindu ghosts that are partial to fish—”

“ Why not call them thieves ? ” she asked. “ Wouldn’t that be simpler ? ”

“ Thieves cast shadows, *Didi*. These others cast no shadow.”

So grown men were afraid of ghosts in broad daylight—well, really, if *that* was the sort of thing they still had to contend with—

“ Oh, bother—bother—bother—” she said.

“ It might be a help if we had a motor, *Didi*—like you once spoke of—”

Pachu spoke dreamily and his eyes drifted out across the river, as if he had not remembered the suggestion till that moment.

Joan automatically followed his gaze. Yes, he was right. There, on the bank, she had imagined a concrete garage and trucks racing away to Calcutta with the early morning catch: “ What price would we get now on the Calcutta markets ? ” she asked.

“ They say *rohi* and *katla* fetch four rupees a seer and *ilsa* six—”

“ And here they fetch only two, is that right ? ”

“ No, no, *Didi*. Not even *ilsa* fetches as much as two—”

She recalled afterwards the suspicious glibness and gravity of Pachu’s replies. She suspected that the whole episode of the ghosts was the purest invention, a round-about way of provoking them to final extravagance. But by then it was too late. They were committed.

Not that, on the face of it, the purchase of a couple of second-hand trucks was unduly extravagant. They still had a good portion of the Government grant unused.



Capital was no worry and if the use of the trucks would double their profits, then surely the capital would have been well spent? Within a week the trucks had arrived, two *tatis* from Tulsigram were being taught to drive and a bamboo shed had been erected on the river bank. She would only stay, Joan told herself, until the new method of marketing had been established.

## 2.

The evening was as warm and soft as cat's fur. The river glittered in moonlight. On the grass in front of Joan's hut a crowd had collected. The daughter of one of Kaligram's few remaining Brahmins was being married. Manik Babu was clerk-accountant to the Co-operative. In spite of his caste—and partly perhaps because of it—he was as miserably poor as the rest of the islanders. But he was determined to celebrate the marriage with all the pomp necessary to the premier social event of the season. He had taken a loan from the Co-operative to pay his son-in-law the dowry. And the "Office-tent," decorated with greenery and coloured flags, had been turned into the arbour from which the couple would take their vows.

The guests of honour were seated on Joan's veranda. Next to her was the Brahmin matchmaker who had come over the water to watch, since he would collect his fee at the end of the ceremony. Wild-eyed and hollow-cheeked, his forehead fiercely slashed with sandalwood paste to prove his piety, he struck Joan as not at all the type she would expect a professional splicer to be. But to talk to he was genial enough and he told her the secrets of his trade with the complacency of a travelling salesman. Never find even the shadow of a fault with any young man or woman of marriageable age. As to Manik Babu's daughter, well, it had not been easy. The groom's family were far from impressed at the ceremony of "First Seeing." They were critical of both her complexion and her hair. They subscribed, too, to the local

suspicion that the inhabitants of Kaligram had been cursed by their patron goddess. But the horoscope was favourable and the affair had been clinched when he brought a specimen of the girl's signature for their inspection since the girls of their own family were all illiterate. The matchmaker had thought it prudent not to mention that her name was, in fact, all that the candidate could write.

Look ! the bridegroom's party had put out from the bank. A dozen fishing craft bobbed through the moonlight. The drummers sitting round in a circle on the grass scuttled off into rapid and subtle rhythms. This was the cue for the children of the village to distribute the garlands that they had been making all day. Joan was plentifully loaded with *Rajini gandho*, the smooth-smelling Queen of Scents. Now the boats glided gracefully up the foreshore. The mud glistened like silver sand. The bridegroom's cabin had been twined with tinsel and white lilies. For a moment even Joan found it hard to remember that squalor was being mated with misery: that the young couple would start life in the bridegroom's village with no more than a cow and two acres of land, which caste forbade that they should farm for themselves: that starvation would threaten their children. There was a crescendo of brass and drums as the bridegroom stepped out of the boat.

Manik *Babu* was there to greet them: "With God as witness I bequeath my beloved daughter to you for life. I renounce all claim on her. From now on you are her master, comrade and protector. See that she remains in happiness." The bride was waiting by the tent. She was dressed in a scarlet *sari*, the veil pulled right over her face. The soles of her feet and the palms of her hands stained with crimson *alta*. When her groom had been installed in the *arbour*, she walked round it seven times. Then the end of her *sari* was tied to his *hawl* and her bridal veil was lifted to allow him a first glimpse of the face that his parents had chosen for him. A meal was

brought for them to share on a huge brass plate. Through all this the priest sat chanting Vedic hymns in front of a small sacrificial fire—hymns in a language 4,000 years old which not even he could understand. The fire spluttered merrily, fed with clarified butter.

Joan noted the details for her black book. Nowadays, of course, no such ceremony could take place on the islands unless "Mother" was in the forefront of the audience. Last week she had witnessed the wedding of the headman's son on the island of Bagmari. The men, who had once seemed so remote and savage, had put on a special display of athletics for her benefit, leaping among withered and stunted trees for flaming brands that had been fixed among the branches; competing for her praise with childlike eagerness.

It was all totally unexpected after the twilight of misery which seemed, on her first visit, to envelop each island in its dim and neutral mist.

During the Festival holidays this year she must arrange to bring some students from Sen Street so that she could organise more detailed study. She already had a mass of material. It was proper analysis and systematisation that was needed. And for that, since she had decided to leave next week, she hadn't now enough time left.

Pachu was picking his way through the crowd, holding his purple skirt with all the refinement of a well-bred woman walking through slums. She would always think of Pachu making towards her like this, a look of tolerant humour on his fastidious face.

"*Di, di*, the lorries have only just returned—"

"Did they have a good day?"

"They never reached Calcutta—"

"A breakdown?"

"They were held up at the police station just beyond Dakpur—"

"The police station—why?"

"They say we do not fulfill the commercial licensing laws. And that we cannot take to the road until we do—"

"But that's ridiculous. What do they mean?"

"They would not let the lorries pass—"

"I shall go with them tomorrow—"

Out near the tent someone had launched into the inevitable hymn to Kali. The next phase of the battle had begun.

The lorries had been held up under some Act long defunct, which stated that elephants required a special permit to travel on district roads. Although elephants were no longer in use, the police claimed that this regulation had never been rescinded and that it applied logically to the elephants' successors. It was all perfect nonsense, of course, and no one but simpletons would have been taken in by it. With Joan on the leading truck, the police dared not threaten to lock-up the drivers if they proceeded. So the second round went to the Co-operative. But for the third the police hit on a new strategy. The lorries were charged with having wrongly placed number plates, and, the day after, with not having a companion driver on the front seat. By the end of the week no less than eight separate charges had been made out, each of which would have to be dealt with at the local courts.

"But this is simply preposterous. No truck in Bengal is obeying a single one of these regulations—"

"Someone has made it worth their while," Pachu replied.

"I shall complain to the District Magistrate—"

"I do not think there will be need, *Didi*," and Pachu smiled. "Perhaps the 'charges' will not be brought. The *thana* is staffed by Bengali policemen. They are fond of fish—"

"What do you mean?"

Pachu rubbed the side of his nose: "Yesterday I made suitable arrangements. We have only to supply their lunch—"

"No, Pachu, no—" Joan remonstrated with every limb at once, even the veins on her long, taut neck quivered

with indignation. "We must take our stand on justice. I will go to court personally when the case comes up—"

She chose European dress for the occasion. Petitioners and defendants, squatting in silence outside the Dakpur court-room like beggars at the Temple gates, assumed as soon as she appeared that she had judicial power to wield on their behalf. They rose to greet her with propitiatory murmurs. Joan grimly refused to have her case tried first. She would use the ordinary channels open to a peasant, she would claim no special privilege. For eight hours litigation steamed squalidly on in the boiling crowded cauldron with its peeling walls, barred windows, and rusty iron railings round the magistrates' dais. Joan listened without flinching, head to one side, lips parted, eyes busy.

In dock at last, she pleaded that persecution threatened the life and health of the most interesting social experiment in Bengal. If all vehicles were treated in the same way as theirs had been, then a whole year would be needed to deal with one week's driving offences alone. The court was hushed. Even an old woman who had crouched for hours deftly rolling *pan* for the litigants, stopped work to listen.

Joan emerged with no more than a nominal fine. The Magistrate warned the police not to waste their time on insubstantial charges. Justice, she told Pachu, can always be vindicated, so long as it is persistently upheld.

Pachu said nothing, but the police continued to enjoy daily fish dinners.

### 3.

—The Bengali year ends in mid-April with the last day of the month of *Chaitra*. The new year opens with the storms of *Baisakh* that fall like Rudra's thunderbolts out of a clear sky. The first signs of storm are tremulous tongues of dust lifted without warning from the ground. Then the sky hardens and a white-hot wind comes

scorching across the plain. Hell has burst open and the earth shrinks beneath the escaping blast. At the first burning breath of the wind cotton bolls moult from the *simul* bushes, tumbling scruffily over the ground. The *neem* blossoms scatter like dust, leaving garlic-scented berries. The northern year is buried in the iron coffin of winter, but in India it is dragged down to the underworld to experience the tortures of the damned, where it waits to be rescued, not by the gentle sweetness of a northern spring, but by the dramatic fury of the monsoon.

Joan had always managed to resist the heat by a careful conservation of energy. But that was in Calcutta where she had electric fans, running water, shower baths, ice-cubes from the refrigerator. On Kāñigram the effort of rotating a palm leaf to cool herself caused a lather of sweat. Aching and dazed she limped through the burning hours lifting her face to the breeze at dusk like a cast-away drinking rain. Somewhere, curled up inside her, a pale ghost of the old forthrightness, the old zeal and irritation still clung to a pitiful half-life. But she dared not let the ghost loose. How else endure the horror of the world outside except by switching off the current that connected one to it? She knew now why India made such a fetish of patience.

She had never intended, of course, to get caught in it. And she would not have done so if it had not been rumoured, during the very week that she was rescuing the Co-operative from the clutches of the police, that plans for the catchment basin were going awry and that the sluice and reservoir would never be finished before the rains.

The truth was that here, too, the scheme had become too ambitious for the fragile scaffolding erected to support it. In a fit of November optimism Joan had suggested that the reservoir be built in such a way as to make possible the development of irrigation in the neighbourhood and that the sluice gate, through which the overflow was going to be drained from the river, be made

so as to harness at least a small quantity of electric power.

By the beginning of April there was still no decision on these plans and all that had been accomplished was two sections of primitive earthwork across the bed of the old river. Dragging herself through the heat Joan staggered to and from Calcutta in order to rouse Government departments to a sense of urgency. Every step was an effort of will. In the stifling carriage a grit-laden wind remorselessly scarred her face. She could not eat. She attempted to slake her parched throat with lemon rind and a thermos full of hot, chlorinated water. But she succeeded. Early in the new year, the Government agreed to insert a sluice before final decisions had been made about the hydro-electric station. This sluice would be hand-operated by capstan, which would raise or lower the steel gates to whatever height was thought right for the river's overflow into the reservoir behind. But by the beginning of May no contractors had taken up the work.

The islanders had, of course, their own explanation of the delay. They were convinced that the landlords on the District Board had opened a fresh campaign against the Co-operative and that the contractors had been bribed not to finish the drainage scheme in time. The landlords, Pachu said, would rather see the islanders drowned than prosperous. In this heat nothing seemed fantastic to Joan any more. She decided to call on Dilip Babu at Rampur so as to estimate what truth there could possibly be in Pachu's wild assertion. As usual he had made it in the mildest and most reasonable voice.

Dilip Babu was in the front courtyard feeding for the first faint golden coolness of the evening. He greeted her with elaborate affection as if he had been daily saying the names of God in her honour. Joan was struck at once how quickly he had moved to the head of the rambling household since Ma's death. He clapped his hand for food and criticised each item with which she was supplied. One niece was ordered to fan her while she

ate, another to keep away flies. The huge plate of savouries and a glass of almond sherbet fell gratefully on the palate after months of tinned and tasteless food and it was some minutes before Joan could bring herself to explain the reason for her visit. Meanwhile Dilip *Babu* sat with sardonic impassivity on his bolster, stroking a well-muscled leg.

She described the rumours of persecution which flew across the water like an epidemic and appealed to him for help in their struggle. He was known already as benevolent and influential. If they had him on their side, then their work would be strengthened and his prestige would grow.

She was surprised at herself for falling so naturally into the indirect, Oriental manner of delivering a rebuke. But at the end of it she gave him a challenging British smile, lifting her chin and slightly clearing her throat. Although still observing the conventions of courtesy, I expect, so her look said, a truthful reply.

Dilip *Babu* suavely acknowledged her compliments over joined palms. He was indeed, *deeply* concerned for her scheme, as she had realised. He had been wondering, whether there was any auxiliary action, however trifling, which he could render to promote its better success. He was aware—only too acutely aware—of her own prodigious and sacrificial efforts. Now she had indicated clearly the course for him to take. He would try and forestall the fears and misconceptions under which not a few fellow-landlords so sadly laboured. He would do his poor best to influence public opinion in favour of her magnanimous, her noble task. He had, indeed, attempted so to support her already. But now he would redouble his efforts.

His speech might have been lifted straight from a Disraeli novel.

He insisted, since she was bent on returning to the islands that night, on sending one of the villagers from Rampur to escort her safely back to the banks of the



river. And so she set off accompanied by a servant and an exultant clamour of crickets, while vapour steamed up from the still baking earth till the stars simmered gently in the sky.

She was little the wiser. The chief trouble with the Oriental method is that one needs a great deal of experience to judge whether it has been successful. For all she knew Dilip Babu might still be either a rogue or a cultured country gentleman. But she was not called on to decide between the two; for next day the contractors appeared at dawn to recommence their work.

That evening another landlord visited the village. He had a spinal weakness, arrived on a palanquin and lay in the middle of the withered sward propped on bolsters. His name was Sultan Mia. He smoked a hookah, drawing the smoke through water in a hollowed coconut. He wore battered spectacles and a white Muslim skull cap. Pachu, on the edge of the group that surrounded the old gentleman, muttered: "When there is carrion then the vultures gather."

Pachu explained to Joan that before the floods the villages were covered by a thicket of intermediary land rights. These small rent-collectors held their position by sub-infeudation from the *zamindars*. The *zamindars* were now being expropriated by the Government, but the new laws had not reached their feudatories. When the villages were submerged these small *rentiers* gave up all hope of receiving their dues. But now that the Co-operative's success was rumoured they were beginning to regret their decision. Sultan Mia was the first in the field. His visit, disguised as one of friendly interest, was probably, so Pachu said, a first step towards the recovery of his rights. But he wanted to make sure that the Co-operative was indeed flourishing before he staked his claim as a shareholder. After the rains, when they were finally established, it was from this quarter that they would be subjected to their next full-scale siege. Didi had best start preparing herself now.

Joan gritted her teeth and pressed knuckles to her forehead. The wonder and fascination with which, a month before, she had found herself drawn into the complex pattern of her islands had gone. In its place there was a sense of oppression, of helplessness and futility. Cast, custom, tradition, land usage silted the landscape, like so many layers of dead and rotting leaves. Whenever she tried to move her feet sank in, hopelessly bogged down in the morass, and her head swam as if with some steaming and musty odour. She understood now why the grim Hindu deities had replaced the trim divinities of Greece. Why too they had such an infinity of arms and legs and heads. Nothing in India could ever be simple. Everything horribly proliferated.

She tip-toed quietly behind the new arrival.

If only she had never come to the islands, if only she was back in Calcutta. What a paradise Sen Street would be in comparison ! Her own bed in an empty room where she could pull down the blinds and blot out the hostile sun. Where she could lie down naked, stretching her sweating body beneath an electric fan.

She crept into her hut. Norener-Ma, who was frying egg plant in coarse mustard oil for her mistress's supper, called out—but Joan pretended not to hear. She took two books off the shelf that she had fitted on top of a mango crate. The Floude Commission "Report on the Bengal Land Tenure, System and Permanent Settlement" and the recent Congress Publication on Land Reform. She opened them mechanically, as if performing a reflex action. Then she smoothed out a page in one of her black books.

She read each paragraph twice before it made sense. And when she wrote her notes, she had to use a pencil since her hand left a dull sweaty stain on the page, which smeared the ink from her pen.

#### 4.

In May heat lies over Bengal like a deadly plague.

Kites and vultures hovered motionless as though strung on quivering wires of blazing air. They watch ceaselessly for the slightest sign of life in the countryside, which lies clean and bare as a skeleton beneath them. On the Dakpur road an ancient leathery cow had heeled over in the dust to die and with an uncanny instinct the vultures knew the instant it had breathed its last. Down they dropped, clumsy, ugly, pitiless, and started greedily picking the carcass to the bone. It was their only instinct. When the evening bus approached, lurching from side to side, the vultures took no notice. Two of them were crushed to death beneath its wheels. On Kaligram the "Brain-fever" bird, silent throughout the winter and spring, had suddenly turned obstreperous. "Rain-come, rain-come, rain-come," it screamed, rising to a lunatic crescendo. Then it cut off abruptly. But a few moments later its obsession broke out again. It shicked all night long in the neem tree under the glittering moon.

A snake had appeared. One night Joan, lying in a sweaty doze on her veranda, was awakened by a hubbub near the Temple. The snake had slipped into one of the shacks where a family was sleeping on the floor. It bit a child and then dived through a hole in the sacking wall. Within a few moments the child was dead and the women of the village sent a terrible lament slanting towards the stars.

The snake, which must have swum over from the mainland, had made its burrow in the cracked masonry at the base of the temple. The villagers evidently considered its choice of a site to be symbolic and, instead of declaring war on the venomous intruder, they left milk and water at the Temple entrance, daubed the stones with vermilion and *alta* for good fortune and kept a special oil lamp burning on the step at night. By this means they hoped to pacify their guest. Joan protested. She told them that the snake had chosen the Temple to hide in for perfectly natural reasons. It was the only stone building still standing on the island and snakes always

preferred rocks and masonry to mud. She told them, too, that fussing round the hole with drink and worship would only increase the animal's nervous venom. The women smiled a little sadly and shook their heads. Kali was angry. They must do what they could to please her. This attitude appealed to the snake. It did not reappear for a whole week.

Nowadays Joan took her bath and washed her clothes in a village tank. And because of the gradual sinking of the water-level the process had become more and more perfunctory. The tanks were baked and cracked—only the one below the Temple had as much as a thin, scummy layer of water left in the bottom. Joan paddled in this for a few moments, trying to suppress nausea, then smeared herself with mustard oil on the bank. Next she must squeeze a bucket full of water out of the tube-well. This was all she dared allow herself for washing her clothes and finishing her ablutions. Dripping with sweat she retired into the shade and beat out her *sari* with a baton on the Temple steps.

One morning as she was walking back to the well, she heard a noise like water spluttering in boiling fat. She looked up. There, at the side of the Temple, stood the cobra, its neck raised 18 inches in the air, its tiny head darting from side to side above its distended "hood." It was being mobbed by two angry kingfishers. Joan had time to notice the graded colouring—gamboge on the throat and stomach shading to dark olive green on the back: and on the hood, curious black markings like the mask of a clown.

The cobra was so intent on its battle that it did not hear Joan creep up behind it. Then as the birds flew off and the snake turned, Joan took a wide swing with her baton. Another instant and she would have been too late. She had a further stroke of luck. As it turned, the cobra lunged downwards and Joan's blow, which would otherwise have fallen on the well-muscle neck, struck the arrow-shaped head with perfect precision. The animal,

temporarily stunned, uncoiled its six-foot length like a whip and helplessly lashed the dust. Joan battered its brains to pulp.

She staggered over to the Temple. Sweat was streaming down her face and her heart beat violently. She held her long, firm hand in front of her eyes and was horrified to see how it trembled. She sank exhausted on the steps.

Already the brief respite of dawn was over. Embedded in acres of baking mud the dried-up stream of the river glittered like a reptile in the sun. Beneath the Temple arch the dark figure of Kali danced against the burning sky.

With scarcely a sound the villagers had risen from torpor and now they gathered, whispering, round the dead snake. They turned towards Joan with bright, respectful eyes. Yesterday Mother had talked about leaving. But now—"You cannot leave us, Mother. Only you can save us from the wrath of Kali."

"I have to go. I have to go next week." Her voice was mechanical, listless, a prisoner under torture still repeating that he would not speak.

Norener-Ma came forward, shaved and bent and withered. She raised her hands in supplication like some scarred and desiccated pilgrim.

"Mother will stay," she said and she was smiling.

Joan looked round silently at the villagers who stood watching her, noticed Manik Babu with his lips drawn in agonised imitation of a grin. It was scarcely six o'clock, yet the glare from the river already hurt her eyes. How can I leave them in this furnace? They need me. I have raised their hopes. I cannot go with their hopes still unfulfilled. To stay is no longer an escape. It is a grim and terrible duty.

Instinctively the villagers seemed to understand not only what her decision was, but why she had made it. One by one they bent down in reverence, taking the dust from her feet.

Joan was too confused, too exhausted, to stop them.

# Seven

THEY say in Bengal that the monsoon 'never breaks before the last day of the month of *Jaistho*—the 13th June. The 12th June, then, was considered safe for a ceremonial opening of the sluice gate. It could not, anyhow, have taken place earlier since that very morning the last cement was applied to the brick wall and it was not until mid-day that the steel doors were lowered into place by a gang of twenty workmen, with striped towels wound round their loins, chanting with revivalist fervour as they tugged and strained.

A dangerous number of workers had been engaged during the last few days on making elaborate preparations for the opening ceremony, for the chief contractor was determined to impress the authorities with the importance of what he had done. On the far bank of the old river a series of arbours had been erected and decorated with flags and flowers. Beneath them the District Magistrate and lesser Government officials were to stop for drinks and sweetmeats placed on specially constructed wooden tables for their delight. Over each doorway hung a banner with, on the front, "Welcome to the District Magistrate" and, on the back, the chief contractor's name prominently printed in gold letters. During the refreshments it was hoped that this name would sink deeply enough into official consciousness to be recalled next month when last selections for the Republic Day Honours' List were made.

But neither the District Magistrate nor the local government officials ever arrived. At two o'clock a cloud no bigger than a man's hand was seen on the northern horizon. Within a quarter-of-an-hour it was advancing rapidly across the sky like a coffin lid. The long fronds of the palm trees behind the arbours gave an ominous, metallic shiver as if afflicted with rigor in the middle of feverish heat. Crows, ravens, rooks, and vultures aban-

doned their outposts and settled ludicrously in stumpy five-foot banana trees, from whose leaves, shaped like the sails of a windmill, they expected the best protection. The first drops were as fat and heavy as gobs of batter falling from a frying pan. The peasants who had come to watch the fun made a dash for the arbours where they huddled together binding thin cotton *dhotis* close to their shivering bodies. Within a few minutes the decorations were a sodden tangle on the edge of the dike and the dust bowl of the reservoir had turned to a marshy swamp.

But the contractor and his retinue did not despair. They stood out on the embankment peering through the smoking curtain of rain for signs of the ceremonial party from Dakpur. As his court costume the contractor had chosen an army great-coat about eight sizes too big for him. He now turned up the collar, tightened the Sam Brown and covered his head with a knotted handkerchief. His lone figure, muddy but unbowed, faced the fierce torrent without flinching.

The villagers said that they had never known rain so wild or wicked. It continued without stopping for a whole week. All Joan's clothes went mouldy and her food tins were thick with rust. By Wednesday a tin of cheese opened two days before was inches deep in mildew. The water nuzzled down squashly into the thatch. Then, a day later, the thatch was breached and nights became a wild flight over the floor pursued by leaks. Yet Joan's hut was the driest shelter in the village and once again the rest of Kaligram crowded on her veranda, blocking from view the thin, grey ribbon of sky. Singing, laughing, games of cards, cooking—all continued on the far side of the matting walls till well into the early hours of the morning. Joan tried not to protest. She knew that the homes from which they had fled were now nothing but a heap of dripping sacks and that their floors had turned to mush. She knew that since the rains had started no one besides herself would ever see the point of keeping alive their slender sense of time. She even admired the

wonderful good humour with which they bore their horrors.

But it was not easy to be patient. On the fifth day she began to feel ill. Nothing much at first, a relaxed throat and a faint headache. She had plainly, so she told herself, contracted a chill due to the sudden change in weather. She doubled her dosage of pills and tried to steel herself to swallow the rice and lentils which Norener-Ma was busily preparing for large numbers of the villagers—only a few houses were any longer dry enough for kitchen fires and Norener-Ma had taken the refugees naturally under her wing. Joan chewed each mouthful with dyspeptic thoroughness, forcing it down her parched and burning throat. She longed for fresh lemon juice. But she had run out of lemons. Her boiled and chlorinated water made her feel sick.

After a week the rain gradually gave way to an evening of hot, glittering sunlight. The birds broke out of the underground in which they had been lying shivering and mute, crickets let off a hymn of thanksgiving like a steam siren. Even the rain drops, now dripping heavily from leaves and branches and soaking thatch, sounded as gay as a polka. The villagers came out on the sodden sward. A fire was lit and the local tenors drifted off into bitter-sweet songs about Krishna, the Cowherd, and the troubled passion of the milkmaids. But rejoicing was short-lived.

High tide was at nine o'clock and it was soon obvious that the swollen water intended to rise well above Kaligram's first row of houses. The inhabitants evacuated to higher ground carrying their pitiful belongings in bundles up the temple steps. Pachy was soon over from Pipha with tales of misfortune spreading on other islands. Bagmari was already submerged except for two houses, Ragpur's only goat had been drowned. But Joan was reassuring. She pointed out, that, although the river had certainly risen to an amazing height in the course of eight days, this was as high as it could ever possibly rise.



now that the sluice had been lowered to draw off the overflow.

Next evening, however, after another ten hours of rain, the tide rose several feet higher. Joan sent Mojid and Govinda to see what had happened to the sluice.

The boys returned to say that as far as they could see there was nothing wrong with the sluice. It was raised level with the bank—the gates being therefore still some eight feet above the water.

“Level with the bank? But the contractor left it well below the dike level—What did the watchman say?”

There was no watchman.

“The contractor told me they were building a bamboo hut for a watchman and that he would be sent out from Dakpur to make sure that the sluice was not interfered with during storms.”

“The hut was never built, *Didi*, because of the early rains,” Pachu explained.

“Then you must go back and lower the sluice yourselves—”

But the boys hesitated. They did not understand the capstan.

It was perfectly simple, she said. She had already explained it.

“Perhaps they are afraid, *Didi*. They are only young.”

“If they are afraid then who else is prepared to take their place?”

No one stirred and Pachu looked fiercely round the audience as if he had put the question himself.

Joan hauled herself to her feet, she was cloaked in a thick army blanket to stop herself from shivering, the blanket she normally spread as a mattress beneath her bedding roll. “Then if none of you have the courage,” she said. “I shall go alone.”

It was what the villagers called her “fried egg-plant voice,” for as she spoke she spluttered angrily like an egg plant when it is tossed into a pan of boiling oil. The villagers looked at her sheepishly.

Joan steadied herself against a pillar. She realised with horror that she could hardly walk. How on earth would she ever reach the sluice? But Pachu had taken matters in hand. He announced that of course he would go in a tone of voice that implied he had never intended otherwise, and he set about appointing three of the *Bagdis* who had fled from beleaguered Bagmari to accompany him.

They returned an hour later in agitation. Just as they had started to lower the capstan, a gang of *goonda*-criminals who had been hiding on the steep slope of the old river bank, had sprung out and attacked them. Pachu exhibited the bruise where he had caught a blow from a wooden club wielded by the toughest of the three.

"But who are these *goondas*—what are they doing there?"

"They're probably employed by Dilip Babu—or by Harish Chandra—"

"Do you mean to say that landlords actually pay criminals to carry out their filthy designs?"

"Not directly nowadays, of course," Pachu emended. "In the old days there used to be regular *goondas* employed by the landlords as their personal bodyguard. They were called *lathials*—club-men. But the Government stopped all that and now they have to be more indirect. But sometimes the landlords who wish to exert pressure give money to criminal elements. The criminals are led to understand what forms of service will be acceptable. And they know that, whatever the work required, they will not be troubled by the police. But it's all quite indirect, *Didi*. Nothing can be pinned on the landlord. Two years ago when Dilip Babu tried to evict some peasants who refused to move their houses were attacked by *goondas*. The police said it was a case of common robbery. But no one believed them. After all, *Didi*, who would want to rob a poor cultivator for two annas and a coconut?"

The villagers took these startling revelations with com-

plete equanimity as if they were part of the natural order of things. But Joan, although her head was burning and she was aching in every limb, seized pen and paper and bending beside a storm lantern started to write a letter to the Circle Officer.

First thing tomorrow morning, whatever the weather, someone should take it to Dakpur by truck and wait for an answer.

By the time she had finished she was trembling all over. So idiotic to be laid out like this with a mere chill. She had to wait, head buried in knees, before she could trust herself to move. The villagers seeing her, thought that the fried egg-plant mood was still on. They were gentle and contrite and grave.

## 2.

She did not sleep all night. The rain had started again and it thudded into the thatch with a hopeless, monotonous moan. As she was too weak and ill to escape from leaks, Joan lay under the canvas bed-roll that she normally used as a mattress with the army blanket as the only protection between herself and the damp floor. All night long fantastic visions strode through her brain. Herself at the head of the villagers leading a pitched battle against invading landlords. Then—plans, strategies, ambushes, tactics, elaborate subterfuges for throwing Dilip Babu off the scent. It was all ridiculous. She knew it. Yet the details pounded relentlessly on.

Next day she did not get up. She lay straight and stiff, listening to the rain. Noreen-Ma came in early, felt her forehead and exclaimed that she had high fever. Mother should rest. She had looked ill for several days.

Joan said: "Don't worry. I shall be perfectly all right tomorrow."

She struggled to a sitting position in order to stretch for the thermometer and medical dictionary packed in her black tin chest. Then she fell back again, pretending it a waste of time to worry about such things. Her fever

was certainly not high. It would soon go if she rested. In fact she was too ill to move to the other side of the hut and was excusing herself for not putting it to the proof.

Norener-*Ma* was back with a band of girls to knead arms and legs.

Joan protested. It was a waste. She would be up for lunch. But her voice sounded so far away that she scarcely recognised it as her own. And she had not the strength to resist.

And now it was evening and there was a strong light branding her forehead. Wherever she turned the light seemed to strike her. It was pouring through the bamboo lattice, for the rain had stopped and the monsoon sun was setting in a violent blaze of glory. Moaning slightly, Joan turned over on her side, fixing her gaze on the floor.

At first she thought something had been spread there right up to the edge of the blanket on which she was lying. A sheet of gossamer crochet work. Some lacy decoration, perhaps, with which the village girls covered the floor of a sickroom. Then suddenly she saw that the sheet was moving. Each speck of gossamer was a white ant. A vast army of them, hundreds of thousands strong, was migrating rhythmically across the floor within a few inches of her face. Joan sat up trembling and shouting. Norener-*Ma* came in. Put her arms gently round Joan's shoulders. The ants are harmless, Mother. They are moving from further down because the house where they were living has been invaded by the floods. Each one is carrying a tiny grain of fluff—just like we humans tie our belongings in a bundle and carry it with us when we move. Look how beautiful. The evening light made each separate speck shine with a golden transparency.

One of the *tatis* was back from Dakpur with a letter from the Circle Officer. They had had to wait all day since he was on a tour of inspection of the year's first flood damage. If there were really *goondus* about, wrote, then one watchman would be no use. He would

need police escort. But they could not spare police. In outlying villages brigands had taken advantage of the rains to attack landlords. But he would free policemen just as soon as possible. In the meantime, Miss Raydon should arrange to have the islands evacuated. He would see that tents were erected for the villagers near Dakpur.

Joan asked for paper and pencil. Then beckoned for Pachu to hold her propped up and for Norener-Ma to bring the storm lantern nearer.

She wrote in a round, laborious, unusually feminine hand. Every word was like trying to shift a load of stones off one's chest with arms, legs and body strapped to the ground.

As she put her hand to the paper she noticed that her wrists were mottled dark red.

"Dear Krishna,

I am stuck here. It appears to be measles. At least I have a rash. I have never had any children's diseases. It is very stupid. That's why I need your help. Yes, please I do need it. Forget the things we don't agree on and do something to help us. Please do. It's so sickening to have measles. If I could I would go to your uncle myself. Pachu says it is Dhip Babu that is doing this—having the sluice gates kept up high, I mean. That's why the floods are rising. Probably I shall be all right soon to go to him myself. So there is no need to worry, really. If it wasn't for measles it would all be quite all right."

She wrote "Registered" and "Express" clearly and carefully on the envelope. She was immensely proud of her foresight.

It was dark. Two figures, Pachu and Manik Babu, were crouching on the floor by her side. Norener-Ma was pressing a wet banana leaf on her forehead and feeding her with sickly-tasting jack-fruit juice in a brass pot.

"Are you awake, Didi?"

"Of course."

"Didi, the Circle Officer told Mej tati that we ought to move. What do you think of it?"

"But you don't want to move?"

"Some of us do, *Didi*. Some of us think that perhaps the islands are cursed by God, *Didi*, and that nothing we can do will ever save them."

"The river is rising again, Mother." It was a face over by the door that spoke. Straining her eyes, and ignoring the pain of keeping them open, she saw circle after circle of these faces pressed round the veranda beyond the flickering ring of the lamp. Each face was grave: like faces called to a death-bed.

"The *bagdis* have all come here, Mother. And the *tatis* and *ghazis* from Tulsigram. Only Pipha is still safe. Perhaps it would be better to go—"

Joan raised herself up. Spasms darted over her back and arms. Electric currents in slow motion. How absurd to have their whole place ruined because of a trivial illness.

"You mustn't leave. I shall stay with you. In a few days time I shall be better. Then we shall do things so that we're safe from the floods."

She tried to shout in order to hear what she was saying. She held out her arms. It was not a gesture of prophetic warning, as the villagers thought. She was gripping the air for support.

Faces were pressed over her, dark holes in the daylight. Brown faces, black faces, faces she had never seen before. Then the faces merged and she saw Norener-*Ma* holding a brass pot. She felt a thin cool fluid spilling over her neck and chin.

"What is it?" she whispered.

"Fever milk from the *neem* tree. The doctor brought it yesterday."

"Doctor? What doctor?"

"The Hindu doctor from Rampur."

"I never saw him."

"Mother was asleep."

"There is no need for doctors."

"It is fever milk, mother. It breaks from the heart of

the *neem* when the tree is dying. It is good, Mother, very good, very precious. In Bengal we go many miles to catch fever milk when it breaks from the dying tree."

And the old face came closer, its lines and wrinkles like veins in a nugget of black basalt. Dried tear stains glistened on the withered cheeks like snail tracks. Joan groped for the old woman's hand.

"Do you love me, Norener-*Ma*?"

"Yes, Mother."

"But why do you love me? I want to understand—"

"When Noren had fever I nursed him, Mother. He was my great joy. He was young and strong and just learning to read. I watched over him, Mother, until his eyes wouldn't close. Then I knew he was gone. But I didn't cry. I remember that I stood up, Mother, and I covered his head with the shawl that his father had worn at his wedding. It was evening so I took a lamp and went up to the temple on top of the hill, leaving my boy alone on the veranda. Oh, a fine temple it was in those days, Mother. You could never imagine how fine. And Kali, our dear Mother, looked at me then. And she spoke to my heart so, that I should never forget. She said: 'Now Noren can be born to someone else. And he will give them the same joy.' And ever since, Mother, when a stranger comes to Kaligram, I wonder if it could be my boy come back in a new disguise. So I look after strangers, Mother, in the way that I would like to have looked after him—"

Norener-*Ma* spoke softly, a rough old hand passing backwards and forwards across her patient's forehead. Joan strained to understand what she said, but her voice sounded from too far away. Her face, too, turned to a tiny dot like a face seen at a great distance—a face from childhood. A face she no longer knew.

Darkness and burning heat. If she lifted an arm or hand white hot chains gripped her to the floor. She called out for help. But no help came. The chains glittered from an immense distance out of a dark sky. And now they were tearing her upwards, like a tree is torn from its roots.

But she could not move. She was welded to the burning rim of the earth.

Water ! Water !

She turned and started to slither towards a dark stream. It was thick with a tangle of weeds. She didn't see them before. But now it was too late. The more she tried to swim, the more they dragged her down. She was exhausted. Mouthfuls of black fluid poured in at her nose and throat. The nauseous September mud of the *bustees*.

Some one was on the bank. "Don't swim. Rest on the surface and the weeds will bear you up," and he bent down to help her out. Was it Krishna ? Her father ? How could she tell ? Did she even know what her father looked like ? Yes, there was a picture long, long ago. A duty photograph of the First World War which her aunts insisted that she keep in her bedroom in a silver frame. That was how he looked, they said, when he came back for the last time from the front and held her on his knees.

"Do you love me ?" she whispered. But her father did not hear, he continued to smile in the stiff way soldiers have when they face a camera for the last time. "Do you love me ? Do you love me ?" Now she was shrieking at the top of her voice—trying to make him hear. But her aunts had come into the room and her father faded to sepia.

She was running away from her aunts. On her pony. Then the pony stumbled and she lay writhing and helpless on the ground while he cantered away out of sight across the fields. Her aunts had caught up with her. They were dressed in black like nuns. She must visit the church and tell God how sorry she was. A grey, empty church, an empty church with high, slender pillars and tall tombs that threw long shadows across the grey stone floor. At the end of the church the great black door clanged heavily shut. The bolt fell outside. Her aunts had left. She was alone in the church. Imprisoned. Perhaps it was a vault, a tomb. Perhaps she was dead. Oh



dear God, I don't want to die. Don't let me die. Not yet. I am only a child. A child, a child ! Oh, God give me water so that I can live.

There were people in the church after all. Krishna was there. In the pulpit. No, not Krishna. Someone—who ? —and others were crowding round the steps.

She called out, straining to make them hear : " Water, water ! "

The church was crowded, suffocating. Faces rushed in on her from all sides.

" You have been ill, *Didi*, and we have come to move you—".

She could understand what the faces said, but she could no longer speak to them. That was why she was seized by a sudden paroxysm of fear.

" Don't take me away. Don't. Don't."

" The river is rising, *Didi*. There have been two days of continuous rain. The floods are up to your veranda. We are moving to the top of the hill. By the Temple. We will be quite safe there. We have prayed to Kali. We will be safe as long as you are with us."

There was singing up in the Temple. The great clay drums, called *kōl*, were out and a circle wove slowly, slowly round the crown of the hill ecstatically praising God. Lamplight flecked the crowded, sweating faces with silver. Norener-Ma was frying rice. Below, the flooded cottages, looked like houseboats moored in a moment of moonlit calm.

They laid her on top of the village table so that her eyes were level with the image. The striding figure peered at her through the shadows. A girdle of pink hands with crimson palms turned outwards, a garland of skulls. Her thick, coarse hair was streaming behind and sewn with sequins—symbol of the star-studded night sky. Four arms. The severed head, a featureless oval, gaping and splashed with blood. The raised scimitar. And, on the right, two hands of mercy and benediction.

Pachu was talking : " The floods are higher, *Didi*. We

have come from Pipha. The whole island is under three feet of water. Kaligram is the only place that is still above the floods. We are all here. Not one of us has run away—"Pachu was smiling. They were not afraid.

Someone had started a hymn in front of the image. Manik Babu's daughter. Her father punctuated the song with lightly tapping cymbals. She had a small voice, lilting yet sad, childlike yet curiously gay.

The crowd pressed in from the rain.

*"Oh, Mother, I blame no one.*

*It is I who dug the water that now threatens to  
drown me.*

*I sank the well with the spade of passion  
And the dark waters of death gush forth to fill  
it up.*

*Alas, there is no way to check the rising waters.  
Have pity, O Mother, have pity on my despair.  
The waters of death are rising.*

*See, they have reached my chest.*

*O, Mother, protect me at the very gates of death."*

Again and again the singer launched herself into the winding, querulous melody, her eyes fixed on the face of the image. She bent forwards, hair dishevelled, sari falling loose from her shoulders. Other instruments—flute, *ahtara*, the huge *kol* drums—joined in. The long, sinuous passion of the music grew gradually more powerful, more tormented. A *bagdi*, wild-eyed, hair matted with wet, pushed through from the back and flung himself down in front of the image.

Manik Babu had brought two earthenware plates filled with burning oil. He was waving them in front of the Goddess with a controlled passion one would scarcely have expected from his thin, respectable figure.

The dark face of the image quivered in a circling disc of flame. The face grew larger. " "

Joan heard a voice through the fire: "You have

resisted. I am horror and evil, sorrow and the dark night of despair. You must fall like a stone through the empty cavern of death."

For the last time the singer had reached her climax. The music sank into silence. There was a murmur from the waiting crowd. "Oy, Ma—Oh, Mother." The singer bent forward in supplication.

Behind, row after row of grave and staring faces, motionless, waiting—

But the dark face of the image pressed closer and closer through the flames. Its eyes opened on measureless distances. Joan felt herself shrink to a pinhead flattened to the face of the earth.

There was a movement at the back of the crowd. A cry went up. "Mother will save us!" A sudden spasm of triumph, of hope passed across the listening faces.

Mother! Mother! Mother!

Through her whole body Joan could feel the tremor and impulse of the desolate, dwindled earth. Round her, on every side, a vast and silent explosion of space and deep cliffs plunging to infinity. Then terrible darkness and once again—a voice. "This is the heart of the world. You have hurled yourself against my drawn sword. You who have lost your life shall save it."

They surged forward out of the night.

Yes, the image had moved.

The Mother was coming!

"Pride, selfishness, desire have all been cut away. You have faced the darkness. There is nothing more to lose. The self shall be given to all things. And my curse shall be turned into blessing, my terror to joy. See—even behind my drawn sword the hidden hand of love—"

The image trembled and swayed on its base. For an instant it seemed to hang undecided, then it toppled forward and crashed on to the ground. As it fell one of the plates was knocked out of Manik Babu's hand. The Goddess' hair went up in a sheet of flame.

Out of the heart of darkness a sudden blinding arrow

of light and the whole sky pierced with expanding radiance.

There was a great cry. A cry of mingled exaltation and horror. *Hari Bol! Hari Bol!* And the worshippers sank to the ground in a final vision of ecstasy.

A scuffle, a press of lights and faces. Shouting and argument, then, suddenly, silence and the sound of rain spewing endlessly on in the dark.

He was bending over her, disfigured by blood. Krishna.

"Yes, I am here, Joan. I have come to take you to hospital—" As she struggled, lashing out helplessly from side to side, hands reached from the darkness to hold her down.

"Mother, we are saved. We are saved, Mother, and it is all over—" Pachu was grinning at her and Manik and Sundor and Norener-Ma. Scores and score of others out of the night.

We are saved, Mother. Saved. Saved. Saved.

And now she was dropping back into darkness, the sound of water closing over her head. Rain hissed from some slowly-vanishing sky. As she sank she felt herself swaying gently from side to side like a leaf falling on a windless day.

She would be glad to rest.

## *Eight*

**G**REAT white towers leaned away from her on either side. Periscopes, she thought. Funnel-factories, futurist décor. The shape of the world to come. So this is it, she thought, and, as in everything else, I was wrong.

But there was a gap in the endless ocean of white and through it a dark, familiar face, smiling. She was glad that here, after all, Indians should be in authority.

"Krishna ! What's happened ? Where am I ?"

"In hospital. In Calcutta. Don't worry. Don't try to move—"

"But what is it ?"

"Aha, in the red corner, plasma. In the white—a saline drip—"

She whispered: "I know. I've had measles."

He laughed: "Oh, no—something a little bit worse than that."

"What then ?" Krishna merely smiled. "What ?" She struggled to raise her voice, but the face dissolved slowly into white cloud.

Now there were more people in the room. She tried to sit up and succeeded in raising her head half an inch from the pillow. "What has happened, Krishna ? I insist on knowing. It's absurd to hide things now that it's over."

"Not quite over. Not yet. And it'll take longer if you go on threshing about like that—" But it wasn't Krishna who spoke. Two nurses were crisply folding her covers. Krishna had gone.

The white waves broke over her, soft and silent as a drift of snow.

"You have been very seriously ill, Miss Raydon. But you will be well again soon."

She shook her head feebly from side to side. "But what is it ?" she moaned. "What is it ? I've been asking for hours—"

"You've had typhus."

"I was inoculated last summer—"

"That doesn't prevent the disease. Only lessens the effect. Besides you have had something else as well—"

"What ?"

Malaria—that's what she thought he said. But she must have misheard. Mosquitoes hibernate in the monsoon and, besides, she had never missed taking her *paludrin*.

But the distant, medical voice was droning on: "You're what we call a suppressive patient, Miss Raydon. *Paludrin* merely suppresses the disease, you see. It doesn't prevent it. My guess is that you stopped taking your pills when you began your attack of typhus. That's why the germs broke loose—"

"How long have I been ill?"

"Nine days here and a week out in the *Mofussil*. But now you are better again—"

Krishna was stroking her wrist and smiling. Once she awoke at home on a summer morning with the smell of Sussex hay. "But Krishna—your face—you were bleeding—"

A crisp voice startled from somewhere behind her head. The room, it seemed, was hung with hidden microphones. "Ah, Miss Raydon has roused again? That's very good, isn't it? But remember Mr. Bannerjee, no excitement."

Joan whispered: "And the islands?"

"Fine—"

"The floods—?"

He made a subsiding motion with his hand.

Joan turned her face on the pillow. Then drifted away. But not into darkness. Into a smooth undulating dream of white—

Next day she awoke with a ravenous appetite and was fed through a glass tube by the angular Anglo-Indian nurse. The day after the bandages were taken off her arms and the apparatus was moved from the bedside. She was given her first solid food.

Slowly, between dozing, she pieced together the story of what had happened. Krishna was a day late receiving her letter, for he had been out of town. But as soon as he read it he realised that she was more seriously ill than she had disclosed. He left for Rampur within an hour. Found that his father, whom he had tried earlier to prod into action over Dilip Babu's malpractices was still immersed in books. Breaking all family precedent,

Krishna then threatened to demand his share of the joint estate in advance—which he was legally entitled to do—unless the control of it was taken out of Dilip Babu's hands. This led to a full-scale row on the front veranda with most of the village creeping up through the rain to listen. Never since his great-grandmother's day, when one of the sons had been converted to Christianity had the old walls echoed so loudly to the sound of wrangling voices. Dilip Babu himself remained sarcastic and calm. But, towards midnight—rumour of what was happening having flashed round the village—a peasant ventured timidly into the open. He was a *ghazi* whom two years ago Dilip Babu, but for Ma's intervention, would have deprived of his land. He had been attacked by one of the *goondas* Dilip Babu had hired. Recently he had met one of these same *goondas* again at a village wedding—and the ruffian had openly boasted of the new work for which his old associates were booked.

The upshot of this was that at half-past midnight Krishna led a party of villagers and servants out to the river in the pouring rain. They carried staves and storm lanterns. The *goondas* who were sheltering in the ceremonial hut on the river bank, attacked them. Two of Krishna's peasants had been badly bruised and he himself received a dramatic-looking cut over the eye which was later stitched. Krishna, his face streaming with blood, then spent an hour trying to persuade a boatman to row him to Kaligram in the storm. He did not reach the island till three o'clock in the morning.

The villagers, of course, at once took him for an agent of the enemy. They would not believe his tale of rescue. Krishna explained that the overflow was already cascading into the reservoir and pointed out that although it was not long past high tide the level of the water was falling with great rapidity. But Kaligram still didn't want their "Mother" to be taken away. They claimed that the image of Kali had crashed miraculously to the ground, and that the Goddess's powers had been transferred to

their human Mother who alone could now give them protection.

But the Mother's task was completed, Krishna argued. Surely that's why they were saved? He pointed out that the miracle of the falling image must have taken place at the very moment when the sluice was lowered—

Joan was shocked. "Really," she implored. "Couldn't I have been taken off without all that mumbo-jumbo?"

Krishna was staring out of the window at a fire-escape and a lowering sunset: "Miracles *have* happened on Kaligram, Joan. You don't seem to realise—"

"The chief one being your midnight dash across the raging waters."

"Oh, I'm just a bearer. Ganesh the elephant God is carried by a mouse. Besides the elopement wouldn't have been too successful if one of your drivers from Tulsigram hadn't driven us to Calcutta through the pouring rain—"

"Well, why call *me* a miracle worker then? All I've done is to show the islanders how to save themselves through their own hard work—"

He smiled. "Accha, Joan—so, that's what you think you've shown them?"

"But what else?"

Krishna did not reply immediately. Instead he inhaled cigarette smoke, head thrown back, eyes closed, exchanging messages with the clouds. "It was love they learnt from you, Joan—not work. They noticed a tiny seed of it when you first visited them. They took it out, planted it, watered it, watched it, tended it until it grew into a branched and leafy tree. They loved you, Joan, so that you should be forced to love them in return."

"It's not *flirt*, You're talking bosh when you know I'm still too weak to argue," and she added: "But it surely doesn't need much sense to see that they would have behaved the same way to anyone else who went there."

Krishna turned round, squinting hard as if genuinely seeking enlightenment: "Accha, Joan—but *did* anyone else go?"



Why should everyone so glibly assume that she'd changed? To Joan it seemed perfectly obvious that she was merely suffering from the passivity natural to convalescence and that the brutality of illness had battered her for a moment nearer the earth. She lay by the hour watching the crows tease slates off the glistening roof of the public wards, noticing the antics of the sparrows on her window-sill, amused that in India even this dowdy bird should have a hard gloss on his plumage unknown to his Western cousin. But this, she told herself, was merely the vacant dreaming of a brain that was temporarily exhausted. It wouldn't be long before the old fierce urge to activity returned.

Like herself her uncle had always had a horror of sick-beds. Yet he was soon visiting her regularly. "Pale and interesting, dear girl, pale and interesting—"

"Hardly pale, Uncle, with this great rash making me look like a Dutch cheese."

"Well, red, then, dear girl—and much *more* interesting as a result!" And Sir Fleetwood plunged straightway into confessions.

Joan, who had not been "shared with" in this way for years, did not quite know what to do. The hands, of course, were no problem. Straight under the sheets with *them*. But the face and eyes were a different matter. She tried slumping half-hidden in pillows, looking too tired to comment but not quite tired enough to want him to stop.

He was being gradually deprived of his position. Of course he had asked for it. This, as perhaps Joan knew, was not the first of his misdemeanours. Men were such prize idiots. Someone should agitate for a law permitting voluntary castration after the age of 50. It was really quite unnecessary of nature to be so grossly extravagant. Her aunt Mimi had been a saint, a miracle of sweetness. A comfort in distress, a beacon in darkness.

Lady Raydon, of course, Joan would have expected to show no more control than a burst pipe. But what came out of the burst certainly surprised her. Her aunt had turned into a monument of neo-Gothic despair. Not because of her husband's unfaithfulness. Not because of his loss of reputation. But because of his loss of nerve. "If only he was fighting the Board I'd feel differently. But he's giving way. I've never known him collapse like this before. Do try and tell him to make a fight for it. Joan dear, you have *such* influence." Even his contrition depressed her. Poor old war-horse, she had campaigned for so long that now, turned unexpectedly out to grass, she crumbled. "You know, dee-ar, how I once wanted to change the name of the house to 'Nirvana' and how sarcastic your uncle was? Well, yesterday, he told me to have the new letter-heads printed as if we had never disagreed on the subject at all. When he was naughty before he never thought he had to give way to me like this—" And the old lady, lips trembling, red-rimmed eyes brimming, lifted an arm hung with a dozen varieties of bead and bangle to sweep the hair off her dome-like forehead.

Joan said: "Perhaps if you were rude to him, Aunt. Perhaps if you hadn't forgiven him. Sometimes—in the old days—I used to think he positively enjoyed doing what he thought you disapproved of. And now you no longer disapprove—that, maybe, is why he doesn't know what to do—"

Sir Fleetwood's reminiscences were not always embarrassing. One morning he spoke of her grandfather. "Old Isaac would have understood what you did in those villages, dear girl. He was a romantic as well as a money-maker. Just think of the way he changed his name. From Isaac Gutkind to Sir Isaac Raydon, K.C.V.O., C.M.G., M.M.—but never 'Bart,' alas, though he would have liked it. Raydon was the name of the street near Aldgate where he sold his first Delft plate. Did you know that? And just think of what he persuaded your poor grandmother to

call us. Harcourt and Fleetwood—like something out of a satire by Oscar Wilde. That must have frightened the poor old party out of her wits—she was church-mouse, you know, and pure-bred English to the tip of her tiniest whisker.

“What was the old boy’s money-making then, but romance? If he decided that Matteo di Giovanni was worth more than the accepted masters, then, by God, he’d make the world agree with him. In ten years he had every millionaire in America feeling a social outcast because they didn’t possess a Giovanni. Incredible. And yet when he started it was with no thought of pulling cash into his own till. I’m sure of that. Even if the old canvas-basher’s price had never risen to more than a few shillings, your grandfather would have stuck to him through thick and thin. But luckily for the family fortunes he had business genius as well.

“Of course, neither I nor your father understood him. Harcourt thought he was money-mad and went romantic in protest. At one moment he wanted to turn Catholic and join a trappist order, at another he was selling the family gold to help a temperance campaign in the East End. I was just as bad, of course. I also thought your grandfather an old hypocrite. I put down all the high-flown talk as salesmanship and persiflage. Regarded it as the perfect recipe for greatness, and tried to copy it in detail. But greatness has no recipe. It just comes naturally or not at all. That’s why I never got within a thousand miles of it. But you’ve got the spark, dear girl. It’s in your eyes. Passionate self-delusion. I saw that there the moment we first met. But I’m afraid I didn’t understand it then—”

### 3.

Staff and students from the Hostel—including the redoubtable Miss Blatterhorn—were most tenacious in their attendance on the sick. One evening conversation

turned to the new sewage plans. "What new sewage plans?" Joan asked. For she had not heard about them. No? Then they must have come out while she was still down on the islands. The municipality was launching them in a big way. They would make use of voluntary labour and compulsory powers would be enforced to ensure that landlords paid for improvements on their property. Joan's name had been mentioned in some of the press comment.

Joan wondered why this news interested her so little. She had always, she knew, been able to free herself from a situation once it proved troublesome. But then there had usually been some other programme beckoning her forcefully on. Now it was apathy, indifference, carelessness. For a whole fortnight not one fretful flicker of energy.

The past—Sen Street, Kaligram—seemed on the far side of a gulf and her own relationship to it subtly changed. So it might seem, she thought, to someone who had gone through a shattering transformation; a change of sex, perhaps, or a reprieve within sight of the gallows. Nerves slack as elastic that had been stretched too far. And inside something dulled and sullen and strangled as surely as if it had come beneath the hangman's rope—Perhaps after all I changed—though not in the way they think.

What had happened that night on the island? She had a vague memory of fire, with the dark Goddess striding through the flames. But her mind fell back, limp, unable to face the effort.

Krishna was back after being away two weeks on undisclosed business. He helped her for her first walk across the room. "I have decided to become a farmer," he said.

She exclaimed: "One more shock like that and I shall fall before I reach a chair." Then she lowered herself gingerly down. "Now you can tell me in safety."

"I'm to manage the estate. It's all agreed. I shall hope

gradually to introduce various classes of co-operative. I took my plans to *Baba*—that's why I have been so long—"

"*Baba*?"

"Yes, *Baba* Sivananda—"

"The old *Guru*—I remember. The one with the X-ray eyes. What did he say?"

"He said that after nearly 40 years it was high time that God and reality coincided for a bit—Eastern vision and Western energy. He knew, he said, that I was still secretly hoping to match the two—"

"He enjoys being cryptic, I remember—"

"We talked about you—"

She shook her head: "Not worth it—"

"I told him I wanted you to come down," Joan continued to shake. "But I do. At the very least I expect a survey from you. We must do the thing in style. Net rate of reproduction by the Kuzinsky method. Ratio of caste to income. Minimum increase in real wages necessary for a decent living. That'll be the sort of thing. The Fishing Co-operative will make a good jumping-off ground."

"I'm going home."

"Home? Where?"

"England."

"For how long?"

She shrugged: "Perhaps I'll be back."

"If you go—" then he stopped. "No you *won't* come back, Joan. Nobody ever does."

"Perhaps not."

They were silent. He had his back to her. He was gazing out of the window. Then he spoke in an off-hand voice as if delivering a grocery order by phone: "I'd brought you a present. But I shan't give it to you if you are going away."

"Dear Krishna—haven't I had enough presents?" The room was still banked with the pots of flowers he had ordered a fortnight before.

"*Accha*, but this is a special one." And he plunged his

arm into an old carpet-bag. "There she is. Remember? I've been keeping her for you." He held up the eight-inch soapstone figure of Kali bought at the last Diwali Fair. Then he shambled towards her, pressing the bunched folds of his *dhōti* fiercely against his thin, protruding stomach. "I thought you had learned, Joan, that we humans are separate, mortal, individual, helpless. I thought you had come to accept the terror of Kali's drawn sword." Joan watched his sallow, bony face. She had parted lips and an absorbed far-away look in her eyes.

"India, land of cosmic rejection. We all have to face it sooner or later. The Western reaction is either to run away like you are doing or to behave like a consumptive at a cocktail party. Eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow Kali will hold our severed head. But the Eastern reaction has always been different. Renounce the self so that there's nothing left for Kali to cut off. This is why the terror of Kali is like a drawn sword. Those who are separate, who try to live by their own strength alone, see only the sword and the hideous garland of skulls. But those who have renounced the self see her right hand raised in mercy and benediction. Yes, that has been the Indian response, Joan, putting ourselves humbly in the hands of Kālī and trusting to the love that lies on the far side of terror. But today there's a third response. Renunciation for the sake of human service. That's where the East and the West can meet. For we need Western virtues if we are going to succeed. Our women have followed the path of renunciation for thousands of years. But they are too meek, too placid. Energy, impatience, punctuality, passion—all those need to be harnessed to *tapas*, the old ideal of austerity. *Accha*, that, you see, is what I think you did on Kaligrāhī. They didn't believe in your plans, Joan. But they believed in *you* and in your power to lead them wherever you willed—just because they saw your renunciation and became convinced of your love—"

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She said: "I've heard this before—"

"Alexandria? Nine years ago? But I'd lost my spectacles then. I stared out at the Mediterranean trying to see why the waiter hadn't come with our coffee—"

But she wasn't thinking of that. She was back on the island. Once more she saw the dark face of the image glowing through the flames. Yes, things had happened which it was best after all to forget.

She caught sight of herself in the glass. The typhus rash had gone. But her face was haggard and lined and her hair hanging in limp strands about her long neck. Even the neck was changed. No longer muscular, rippling, finely modelled. It's come, she thought, the tense defeated look of the exiled spinster.

Yes, it is time to leave.

A lizard scuttled across the bare white wall opposite her bed. It settled behind the woodwork and waited there, cunningly concealed, for the first evening moth to land. Then it was out like a rattling streak of lightning to snatch the wretched insect with a metallic click of its tongue. This was only the start. The performance continued for an hour and each kill showed a new twist of tactics. In the end a second lizard appeared and the two grapple each other in mortal combat, swaying from side to side without losing their grip on the wall.

Joan watched, fascinated.

Outside, since afternoon, it had been raining. All she could see was a leaden sky and the water spewing with sodden monotony over the grey hospital roof. Now it was dusk and the white room was filled with spiritless shadow. Krishna had once told her, she remembered, that the rains were the most beautiful of all the Bengali seasons. For then the countryside sprang to sudden and dramatic life. The winter paddy was sown and covered the bleached earth with vivid green. The undergrowth broke out in its first riot of exaltation. After each storm of rain was over the sun shone, and its tropical brilliancy was matched by the glistening colours of the rain-soaked earth. That was why the Bengali poets spoke of the rains as the Western

poets spoke of spring. The life-giving waters cascading over the parched and thirsty land while the first springs of love rose in the desolate human heart—In the rain a young man's fancy.

Unlucky, perhaps, that she should have fallen ill just as the rains started, and that from the islands she should have seen nothing but their dark and terrible face.

The water drummed listlessly on across the roof. The shadows thickened. Joan could no longer see her lizards.

#### 4.

She had booked her boat for the second week in August. This was the earliest that the doctor would agree to her going. It would be hideous travelling through the Red Sea, then, of course. But she didn't dare leave it later for fear lest India should trap her again. Towards the end of July Krishna went away to buy, incredibly enough, cattle for the Rampur farm. Then one morning while he was gone her uncle came in with Bengali newspapers.

"Seen yourself in the ALIPUR PATRIKA, dear girl? The photograph is an insult—but then 'these vernaculars will print on paper as coarse as sail-cloth.'" And he spread the pages out on the table. There was a three-column feature headed—so she laboriously deciphered—"St. Joan of Sen Street," and at the top an ancient and all but unrecognisable profile. She did not bother to struggle with the rest. And she was right. The evening papers carried rough English digests of the original article. It was a flamboyant description of her life in India. "She was called the prime mover behind the Municipality's decision to install sewage. It was she, so the article said, who had showed that all initiative need not originate with Communists. She was a saint who had once more demonstrated the power of *tapas*, renunciation, and who had followed Mahatma Gandhi's royal road into the heart of the oppressed. The final paragraph was headed 'The Saviour of Kaligram,' and told with suitable embroidery the legend of those last weeks.



It was difficult to be angry with Krishna. She had scolded him for eight years and he had remained obstinately well-meaning. It was too late now to expect any change.

"Why assume that I wrote it?" He asked in mock surprise.

"It seems self-evident."

He grinned, squinting about three inches to the left of her head. "That," he said, "is an insult to my literary style. It was skilfully disguised. It made the perfect appeal to Bengali taste—"

He tried to persuade her to visit Sen Street for a ceremonial farewell before she left. But she resisted, saying that she would have to go there anyhow to collect remnants and that ceremonies were a bore and a waste of money. Besides, it wasn't as if Asha, Nilu, and even Miss Blatterhorn hadn't been hovering faithfully round her bedside.

But she agreed at least, to visit Kolyani, who was living in a slum quarter of Ballygunge, to the south of the city—Robbi having sold their flat for a handful of ready cash while Kolyani was in Delhi. Kolyani had had a fresh attack of consumption and was supposed to rest. She didn't, of course. In fact she was grinding spice when they arrived, gripping the mortar with her feet. She had heavy stains beneath the eyes but was bright and calm, with an eager, thrusting smile that Joan did not remember seeing before. Robbi had lasted three and a half weeks in the income tax department in which he had been found a job. Then he had thrown an ink-pot at a visiting official and was discharged. This episode was followed by one of his worst bouts. But in hospital Kolyani had hit on an idea. She started to revive an old talent for painting. She borrowed some of Robbi's best and simplest work from early patrons—there was one in the littered living-room now, *Gopala* stealing a plate of curds while a huge cow wearing what appeared to be a pair of spectacles somnolently watched him pass—and made three or four

copies, which she persuaded Robbi to sign. They were sold as "authentic, supervised reproductions." Now Robbi had begun to boast openly of having started work again. Last week he had even made one of the copies himself. As she described it Kolyani's eyes glistened and with a quick, girlish movement she readjusted the *sari* over her head.

## 5.

Five days later, on August 2nd, Krishna persuaded Joan to come for an evening ride. He had first mentioned it to her a week before, and it was obvious that he set great store by it regarding it as "a last outing." Tomorrow she would leave hospital and go to Darjeeling for a rest. On her return she would be busy packing for her departure. He asked her to dress in her *sari*. Why? Apparently he wanted to have her photographed. She found this hard to believe. "I thought you disapproved of European women in *suris*," she said, "cultural transvestitism you once called it—"

"Oh," he replied, vaguely, "that depends." Right to the end, she thought, I shall never know what to expect. Astringent detachment one minute—Bengali effusiveness the next. After all these years he's still a mystery.

It had rained earlier in the day, but not heavily. The city gleamed like crystal. They were in an open taxi—chartered by Krishna and kept waiting at the hospital while she dressed. His old extravagance, too—

They headed north up College Street. "I never knew there were any photographers here," she murmured as they passed the railings where Robbi had once fluttered disastrously into sight. They lingered sentimentally at the corner of Sen Street, while she peered down to the Hostel gate.

"There seems to be some sort of do do," she said—for the gates were hung with bunting and flags and a crowd was standing there.

And Krishna: "Let's turn and have a look—"

Joan protested, but too late. The Sikh had put the car swiftly into low gear and swung round—against the lights.

"What's it all about?"

"There's a picture on that banner—don't you recognise it?"

"Looks like a cross between Gandhi and Queen Elizabeth the First—" Joan said frowning at a face horribly splodged on homespun and hanging across the Hostel gate.

"I'm sorry. That's my fault. I'm afraid it was the only photograph I had. I would have liked one in a *sari*—"

"What are you numbling about?" But then, all at once, she understood, for she had seen the words on the banner, "Welcome Home," printed in the national colours.

"Krishna, what on earth have you done?" But it was too late. The taxi had stopped and she was already chin-deep in garlands. A crowd of women stood on the kerb blowing conches.

Gan Babu descended with an address of welcome from the porch.

A student troupe had demonstrated the enthralling mixture—at once incisive and mystical—of Hindu dancing. Chitra had performed with owl-like intensity on the *setar* and Nilu had led the girls in a glutinous group of songs. Now Asha was ladling food down serried ranks of visitors. Gan Babu was, as usual, eloquent. They must make a presentation. Everyone at the party must sign a letter for Miss Joan to take with her when she left. Asha, bent over her bucket, paused for a moment to pass him a beady eye.

"Why not use the old petition, Babu—and save trouble? You're most of you here tonight—"

Gan Babu spluttered over a mouthful of curds. Somebody giggled.

"What petition?" asked Joan.

Gan *Babu* gave a rapid smile: "Of course, Miss Joan has forgotten all about it. Saints bear no trace of malice. She knows that we did not understand—"

"I'm not a saint and I don't know what petition you're talking about."

Gan *Babu* licked his lips and glanced nervously round. No one helped him: "Krishna *Babu* here—he knows about it, Miss Joan. Perhaps he can explain—"

"*Accha!*" said Krishna, but that was the only explanation offered.

"Krishna knows about it?"

"Yes, Miss Joan, it was he who told us how ill you were. He who explained why you had agreed to take a rest—"

It seemed likely to lapse there but at that moment Asha stood up in the middle and let fly in a voice with a frosty crackle to it: "Eighty-nine names no had, *Didi*. And all asking for you to be moved. That was the day of Kali Festival. Remember? It was Krishna *Babu* who stopped it—"

There was a sharp spasm of silence, then Krishna quoted a Bengali proverb: "Rice grows after thunderstorms." And they all laughed out of sheer relief.

And now it was over. The last speech had been made, the last sweetmeat circulated, the last battered garland lifted off sweating necks. They were alone for a moment, while across the way, Asha stridently marshalled her minions round fragments of the feast. Joan leaned back against a pillar watching the stars above the Hostel for the last time. An August evening—warm and sweet and mellow and sticky and sour. Lights hung in the opposite cloister like fruit in the dark coverts of the night. Something in her cried out—I've failed, but I needn't have done. I could have loved all this. I could. I could.

She whispered: "You've done too much for me, Krishna."

"—I only tell people the facts."

"The facts?" and she laughed. "I haven't the faintest"

idea why you've done it all—and now I suppose I never shall—”

A pause, then: “Accha, Joan—”

“Yes?”

“Do your thinking here in India, Joan. It *has* been done before, you know. Don't leave—”

“Oh, my dear, I don't know. I'm in a muddle—”

“Stay, Joan. Go on holiday if you like. To the hills. Take three months' rest. But don't leave us.”

She was agitated: “Perhaps. But now I must get back to bed—”

“No—not yet—”

“I'm supposed to clock in by ten-thirty—”

He gave an imperious wave of the hand: “I've something to talk about—”

“What?”

He waited, gazing up into the night, then: “How old are you?” He passed it to her in an off-hand way, was he deliberately laying a false scent?

“My dear man—what *are* you hinting at now?”

“Mayn't I know?”

She laughed. “Oh, it's not that. Somewhere round 36. One forgets about birthdays—”

“Then I mustn't leave it too late—”

“You're cryptic—”

But his reply was simple: “Some day soon I must take courage and ask you to marry me. Time's getting short. You see—I'd like children.”

She gasps: “Good heavens! Are you proposing?”

“Why not?”

“Oh, my dear—we're much too ugly and silly and old for that—”

In the shadows with shining eyes and lips parted, she was as near as ever to beauty. He said: “Accha, Joan. Maybe that's why it's important. Maybe it's our last chance—” and he drew a thin finger slowly, experimentally, across her cheek as if he was testing a knife blade.

She hesitated: "Isn't it a little absurd?" Then very gently she took his hand away: "Dear Krishna, when will you learn to restrain your charitable impulses?"

He sat still for a moment: "Impulses?" Then he leaned sadly away from her, as if accepting the defeat he had already foreseen: "I'm sorry, Joan. I thought you knew—"

"Knew what?"

"Knew that this had been going on."

"How? I'm afraid I've never been much of a mind-reader."

"Then Ma never spoke to you?"

Joan remembered the Bengali phrase—*tumi amar meye*—as the old lady lay dying. "'You are my daughter' she said. But I suppose I never thought of it literally."

"I asked her to speak to you before I wrote to her. When you went down to Rampur. I suspect those last words of hers must have been an apology. An apology for not having been able to speak. She'd tried so hard to convince herself that it would be right for us to marry." The phrases were disconnected and gave the impression of Krishna musing to himself rather than making direct statements. As he mumbled, he turned his raw and bony face away from her once more peering up the shaft of the hotel courtyard. For the first time Joan saw this power of abstraction not as an escape, but as an inseparable part of him, as a strength rather than a weakness. A sign not only of intellect, but of simplicity of heart. She was tender as well as amused. Any moment now he would start telling her some fantastic Hindu legend about the stars. She must hurry if she wanted to get a sensible reply—

"But Krishna—when did all this start?"

"I don't know exactly—Alexandria, perhaps—"

"And for nine whole years you've never said a word about it?"

He was frowning, a rolled *pan* poised half an inch from his mouth: "Achha, Joan—but would it have been much

good? You see, even now you're not quite sure if I'm joking—"

"But me as a wife and mother—my dear, it is rather a joke—"

Krishna turned on her, suddenly fierce: "Accept, Joan—accept—"

She shook her head: "I'm afraid I can't think it would work—"

He had half stumbled round on his knees; in his excitement his spectacles hung precariously from one ear: "Marriage can be made to wait, Joan. It's not so important. But accept India, Joan. Accept the terror, the beauty, the joy. Bow your head to it. Then start to organise afterwards. That was the message you heard on Kaligram. Don't forget it, Joan. Don't, don't. It could make you unbeatable—"

So, she thought, it's true. For nine years it's been there and I never knew it. The hidden hand of love. It was worth the terror, just to put it to the proof.

She didn't know she *could* cry out of sheer relief. In fact she scarcely knew she could cry at all. That's why the attack took her by surprise.

First of all she tried to face it out. A film-star registering courage in distress—bright eyes fixed firmly on the camera while the glycerine poured down. Then she changed her tactics—

Lifting hand to head, she drew the veil of her *sari* forwards like a modest Hindu bride.